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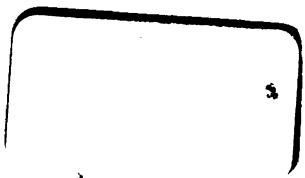
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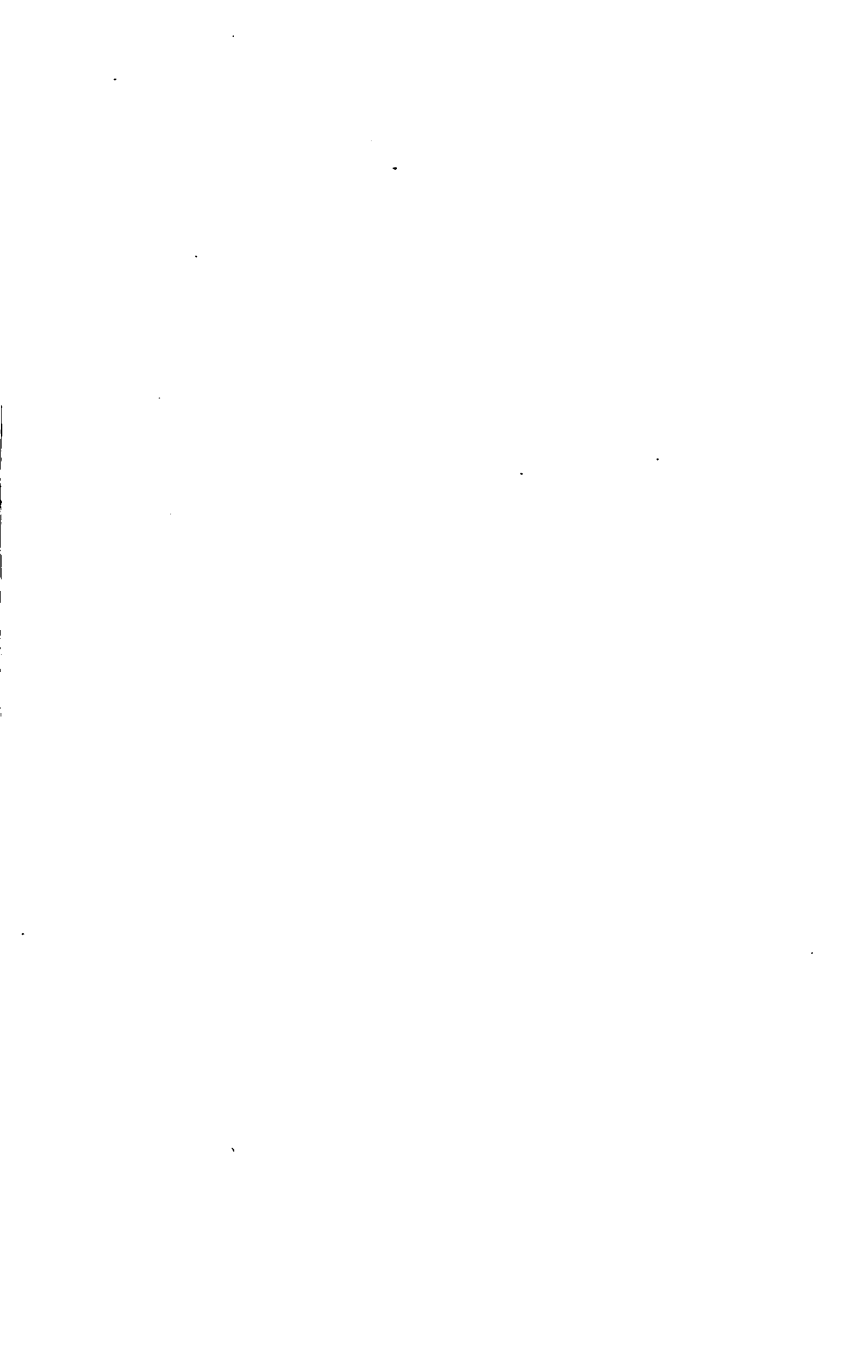
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THE HOLIDAY HUSBAND

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE STORY OF EDEN

CAPTAIN AMYAS

AS YE HAVE SOWN

MAFOOTA

ROSE-WHITE YOUTH

THE PATHWAY OF THE PIONEER

TROPICAL TALES

THE RIDING MASTER

THE UNOFFICIAL HONEYMOON

YOUTH WILL BE SERVED

THE RAT TRAP

VERSES

EXILE

THE PATHETIC SNOBS

THE CAREER OF BEAUTY DARLING

THE HOLIDAY HUSBAND

BY

DOLF WYLLARDE

AUTHOR OF

"EXILE," "THE STORY OF EDEN," "THE RAT TRAP,"

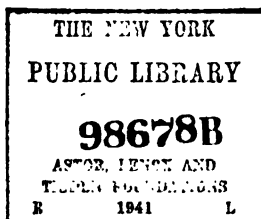
"THE CAREER OF BEAUTY DARLING," ETC.

NEW YORK

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New York, U. S. A.

TO
MY STERNEST CRITIC
MY SISTER ARMINE

THIS BOOK IS DIFFIDENTLY DEDICATED
IN THE HOPE THAT SHE WILL LIKE IT

DOLF WYLLARDE

THE HOLIDAY HUSBAND

THE HOLIDAY HUSBAND

CHAPTER I

This is the story of a girl who failed,
They sent her forth in samite, while the other knights were
mailed,
To conquer and to lead them like a second Joan of Arc,
But they gave her ne'er a weapon, and they struck her in the
dark.

THE man had a beard.

Out of the row of faces opposite to her the girl picked out this one as a little different, and of a momentary relief to her young, tired eyes.

Going home by the Tube every evening she was accustomed to rows of faces, some in profile as passengers hung by the straps, some full-face if it happened that there was no one between her and the seat opposite. A like gap had happened this evening, and her gaze, going down the row mechanically, paused a moment to speculate on the one bearded face amongst others that were either clean-shaven, shaved all but the moustache, or those of women like herself too fagged or indifferent to be interesting. What had struck her in the man with a beard was that he was young, though she found that the beard threw out her calculations so that she could not judge of his exact age—an idle speculation in which she was fond of indulging. She was aware that she looked fully

six or seven years older than her own age, which was twenty, and cynically summed up the thin, sharpened face she saw daily in the office glass as twenty-seven at least. And if she were easily misjudged it was probable that a man might be also, disguised by hair on the face. What she did not realise was that it was the expression rather than the sharpened outlines of her own face that had matured her unduly. There was too much knowledge in the eyes, and too much reserve in the lips, for her youth. But the knowledge was not wisdom—as yet.

The man with a beard was not reading the newspaper, or carrying a bag, or looking as if his eyes still saw columns of figures or customers. This also marked him out as a little different from the usual passengers in the Tube as Vervain saw them day after day, and confirmed her impression that he might be a foreigner. He had a spare face, the nose being unusually well cut and the eyes deeply set under eyebrows with a little knit in them that gave him a certain tragic expression. Of his mouth and chin it was impossible to judge, though the brown beard was cut closely to his face and slightly pointed. But she found that again his beard threw out of focus her critical faculties, and she could not say if he were good-looking, or interesting, or had a story, as she would instantly have decided for herself had he only had a moustache. It confused her thoughts, and made her say to herself: "Of course he is a foreigner, and one cannot judge of foreigners."

Then she began to wonder what it would feel like to kiss him, or be kissed by him. The beard and moustache looked so soft, and yet were an unknown experience.

Such reckless speculations may fill a girl's head without the object of them guessing them in his wildest dreams; but the humour of her thought struck her suddenly, and she felt an unusual tendency to giggle. It really would have been a relief to laugh outright, and the necessity to check an impulse that would look odd and draw attention made her choke a little and smile instead, eyes and mouth together, her whole face rippled by merriment.

The man with the beard had time to observe his neighbours as he did not read the paper, or follow on the business of the day in his mind. His gaze had something shy and wistful in it, like that of an animal used to mankind but so long absent from men that it had lost touch with them. He seemed to carry an atmosphere of silence with him, quite possibly because he did not understand the English language well, and felt his isolation. His eyes were studying the harassed lines in the face of a middle-aged woman immediately opposite to him; they wandered to the left, and were caught and held by Vervain's irrational, irresistible laughter.

He saw a small woman whom he judged to be about six or seven and twenty, exactly as she had decided that observers would, and he thought that she looked ill-nourished and overworked. He would not have described her as a pretty girl, and she disappointed him of the pink and white skin that he almost demanded as an English attribute. Her hair was dark too, so dark that it might almost be called black save that where it caught the broad light in the Tube it showed him colour in the edges of it, for it was both silky and curly. Her face had no colour in the cheeks, but it ought to have had to judge from the rosy line of the lips; and her

eyes were very liquid, grey and black by turns as the iris expanded or contracted. That she might be an attractive woman he recognised; but a pretty girl—no! And what on earth was making her laugh in that hysterical though silent fashion? He felt the irritation of suspecting himself the cause that every other man did who caught sight of Vervain's face.

If he could have known! She glanced at him a moment, fascinated, and wondered if a beard made you shiver, like other rough substances tickling a smooth skin. She knew the touch of a pair of lips beneath a moustache, and—yes!—clean-shaven, very youthful lips against her cheek. Four years of making a living out in the world had added to her experiences when she left school at sixteen, but it was not a full record—it did not, for instance, include a beard!

She became conscious that her untimely merriment was making her unpopular, and left her seat somewhat brusquely, when the Tube reached Knightsbridge, going West. Men looked at her in passing suspiciously, but without any sympathy or indulgence. That face did not belong to the schoolgirl type that breaks into laughter at a touch, silly enough, but the result of mere exuberance. This girl had had something to laugh at or she would not have laughed, and the curves of her pink lips were not entirely kind. She would laugh at you rather than with you. They showed their resentment.

Vervain was annoyed with herself in her turn. She wished she had not thought the foolish thing, or laughed. It was all so silly. About a foreigner too. She looked discontented rather than amused as she made her journey by lift to the level of the street, and still

more discontented when she saw the state of the weather. When she had left the office where she worked it had been a fine, windy April evening, with a fresh sweet air and clouds swept about the sky in ominous banks that she would not consider. Now it had settled into a steady downpour, the wind still blowing gusts of it down the road in long lines ending in the dancing "pennies" for which children are told to look. She had no umbrella, and it was a serious thing to get her office coat and skirt wet through, as it certainly would be before she reached her destination, to say nothing of her hat. The beastly clothes would shrink, and she must look respectable at the office.

"Damn!" said Vervain softly, exactly as a young man would have said it. And to all intents and purposes she had been a young man, earning her own living and with it her freedom, for four years.

"Can I be of any use to you? I see you have no umbrella. May I call you a cab?" said a man's voice behind her shoulder. It was so close to her shoulder that it caused her to swing round with a movement that suggested the defensive, and to look up with the shrewd scrutiny of her world and its experience. She remained looking, because a new element had entered into her speculations with regard to the man in the Tube. In spite of his beard he was an Englishman. Her ears were far too fine not to detect the slightest foreign flavour in his voice which was clear and musical—"a voice set in the proper place in his throat," she said to herself.

"It doesn't run to cabs" she said as frankly as a young male clerk might have said it. "But if you are

coming my way, and don't mind sharing your umbrella, I could get a 'bus at the corner of the street."

"What is your way?"

"I am going to Marston Mansions."

He did not ask her in which direction they lay; he simply opened the umbrella and held it over her, stepping out beside her as she turned and hurried along the dripping street, keeping close to the shops, and being partially sheltered by her companion's body. Had it not been for the grey pall overhead and the rain it would have been broad daylight, for it was only five o'clock. Even as it was the light was good enough to show her face to him more plainly than in the Tube, but it only confirmed his former impressions. She was overworked and ill-nourished, and her hair reminded him of sealskin, it was so dark on the surface with sudden brown hints in the folds of it. She was not a pretty girl; but—yes!—she might be attractive. Her face was not even pathetic as he thought a younger and rounder one would have been if pinched and worn. It was too shrewd, and the somewhat pointed chin looked too full of character.

At the corner she had mentioned she paused a minute, but he held the umbrella patiently over her, waiting.

"Are you going to walk on with me?" she said off-handedly. "It would be awfully good of you."

"I should like to," he said in that well-balanced voice—it was neither too high nor too low. "But are you sure you won't get wet through?"

"It is only a hundred yards or so down this road. I was only going for the 'bus to relieve you of my presence."

"That was not very kind of you," he said, and moved a little closer to her to protect her as far as possible from the rain.

For the first time something in his tone suggested Adventure, and her pulse quickened. Adventure was to her temperament the temptation that drink or drugs or mere sex might have been to others, and which left her cold. The thing she dreaded, loathed, rebelled against, was the deadly monotony of one flat day fitted into its groove against another flat day, without space or colour or the wine of life, and it was exactly that monotony through which she had waded at the office, chained to her routine and chained by it, for four intolerable years. I think if Vervain worshipped any Deity at this time of her life it was the God of Chance.

She made no direct answer to her companion's last soft speech, or the glance of his eyes which she had felt rather than met; she only prayed in her own heart that he would not leave her just yet—that the chance of Adventure might go on a little longer. And a wild thought rose in her mind of not stopping at Marston Mansions, of pretending that they lay further on, just to see what he might do or say next. If she had been more experienced there would have been no uncertainty to charm her. But she really hoped at the moment that he had not caught the name of her destination when he asked it, and his next words disappointed her so that she could have cried.

"Do you live in Marston Mansions?" he said.

"No—but a friend of mine has a flat there, and I am caretaking for her while she is away. She did not want

to shut it on account of her cats, and she could not trust her old charwoman entirely."

"But you are not living there all alone?"

"Yes, I am—with the cats. I see to them before I go to the office and on my return, and the charwoman feeds them at midday before she leaves. I only have her for the half-day, and sometimes not that."

"Your friend does not seem to me to be very considerate! Could she not have left her servants to attend to you?"

"On the contrary, she has done me a very good turn. I don't mind her maids being away also one bit—I am a bachelor, and well used to cook and do for myself. Besides, the char cooks for me and leaves me the things to heat up. You can't think what a joy it is to have a whole flat to yourself when you generally live in a combined room. A *whole* flat, remember! I have walked all through those seven rooms for the mere pleasure of changing from one to another."

He looked down into her raised face with eyes which were becoming more interested and sympathetic. In spite of her pallor her expression was so vivid as to make her face seem vivid also, and he did not miss the colour.

"Poor little soul!" he said, and there was something protective and even possessive in the tone. The rain-washed April evening was developing the situation with the fervour of a forcing-house.

But the patronage of his masculine attitude was not what she wanted. She had looked up for sympathy and understanding, it is true, but she would have looked with just such eyes at another woman. She did not

want him to be sorry for her so much as with her; or to realise the pathos of her lot in life so much as the general hatefulness of cramped surroundings. She paused at the entrance to Marston Mansions with a sense of disappointment and reserve, but she could not quite abandon the Adventure.

The flats seemed to have risen out of the ground before them, they had reached their destination so suddenly. He stood at the foot of the flight of steps leading to the entrance hall, holding the umbrella over her still, as if he did not know how to conclude the incident. And the rain still fluttered by in windy torrents, driving millions of dancing "pennies" down the Spring twilight of the roadway.

"Will you come in and have a cup of tea?" said Vervain suddenly. "You have been so awfully good in sheltering me, and you are quite wet yourself. There will be a fire in the kitchen, and I shall make it up and put on the kettle at once. Do come!"

Even while she urged him to come she half hoped he would refuse. The Adventure tempted her to explore further into unknown possibility, but her dual nature drew back a little coldly from something in his manner that seemed to have grown during the brief walk from the Tube. The utter unconventionality of her invitation did not trouble her nor what he might think. She only resented the natural results.

"Of course I am coming," he said, quickly responsive. "I was just wondering how I should ever have the pluck to find a teashop through this downpour, and I do want tea very badly."

"Come along," said the girl briefly, and he followed

her through the entrance hall and into the lift wherein a stolid lift-boy took them up four floors, apparently without interest or a single glance from one to another. Of course she might be in the habit of having strange men in, he mused. Her story of the caretaking might be a ruse throughout. It was a good style of flats, and not suggestive of doubtful tenants; but one never knew.

The details carried out her statement at any rate. She let herself in with a latch-key and turned on the electric light, revealing a wide passage and some rather good hall furniture. But there was plainly nobody else in the flat, and no sound to greet them but an undeniable miauw! as he followed her down the passage.

She took him straight into the kitchen, where, as she had said, the fire was banked up and the kettle standing ready on the hot plate. So far her story held good. There was the kitchen, and there were the cats. There were two of them, huge Persians, one stone-grey with nothing to recommend him but the usual "points" of English breeders. The other was a more remarkable animal, with a wide lion-like head and curious flattened ears that added to its breadth. He was black on the back, but shaded to reddish brown beneath his body, and his expression was so serious as to be almost menacing.

The girl ran straight to the cats and knelt down beside the cushioned Windsor chairs where they were reposing, putting her arms round the darker of the two. It was evident that this responsibility of her caretaking at least was a labour of love. She buried her face in the soft fur, whispering to the blunt head, and then transferred her attention to the grey before she took any

more notice of her companion. The response to her was a deep rumble that resolved itself into strong purring from both animals, and she raised her laughing face to the man with a beard as she rose from her knees.

"Now that they have begun to sing we will make the kettle sing too," she said as she put it on the fire. "How wet you are! Do come close and dry yourself." She let down the front bars, put on more coal, and stirred the heart of the fire into a glow.

"You ought to take off that coat!" she said, with one of her startling impulses of speech. "Take it off and hang it over a chair—not too near the fire. I don't mind seeing you in your shirt sleeves a bit! It's better than catching cold."

The suggestion was so hopelessly sensible that he began to laugh. He had good reason for fearing a chill, or rheumatism, for he suffered from malaria even in England. With one hand she swung round a Windsor chair invitingly, while with the other she reached for the tea-caddy on the mantelpiece, and he noticed her hands—so thin and transparent that he felt he could almost see through them, with nervous fingers and slim straight palms. The bones must have been as small as a young chicken's, and he wondered idly if he could not crack them with one cruel grip.

"You are a jolly little woman to think of me first, and not to mind!" he said as he slipped out of the wet coat and hung it over the chair back. The girl looked critically at his white shirt and laid two fingers of her thin hand on his arm.

"One side of you is pretty dry—it was the weather

side that suffered," she said. "Get close up to the fire—you won't shrink! Can you make toast?"

"Can I make toast! I will cook you a whole dinner *à la Bohème*, if you like. I have lived in the bush—that's more educative than a combined room in London."

"What's your job?" asked Vervain briefly, as she turned to her own tea-making. "The bread is in the pan in the larder—stay! I'll get it, while you dry."

He waited till she came back with the loaf, cut a slice, and handed him the toasting fork. "I am in the Woods and Forests," he said, fitting the bread on the prongs with nicety and leaning down to the glowing fire.

"India?"

"No—British Moldivia. South America.—The kettle's boiling!"

He was really looking forward to his tea, and anxiously afraid of a shiver of cold from the recent damp; but she turned to him with her changeable face a glow of excitement.

"British Moldivia—the jungle—South America!" she said. "Oh!—and I have to work in an office, and attend committees with eighteen spiteful women! You don't know what a heritage it is to be a *man*."

"Fever, and death, and such solitude as eats into your soul," he said in his turn. "I'll tell you some day. What is *your* job?"

"I'm working secretary to the Colonial Women's League," said Vervain, and her face twisted in a comical fashion that made him laugh. "There's an Honorary Secretary, of course. It is Lady Mercia's pet organization. She is President. There are seventeen others to

work it—all rather worse than she is. Do tell me about the jungle!”

“Do give me my tea! I’m afraid of malaria.”

Her eyes opened wide and remorseful, and she ran—he noticed that she rarely walked—across the kitchen to get a cup and saucer, and then the milk from the larder. The next minute he was in possession of a cup of steaming tea and she was buttering and trimming toast.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she said reproachfully. “I let you walk on the weather side, and you sheltered me and exposed yourself.”

“Do you think I should have put you on the weather side, or asked you to hold the umbrella over me?”

“I couldn’t have reached! What are you? Six feet one? Two?”

“Only six feet. Take off your hat and come and stand beside me and see how high you reach.”

But she had a glimpse of wisdom and would not approach him. “I want my tea—and the cats want their milk,” she said, and fed them with a saucer each before she fed herself, calling them by name. The one with the wonderful head and the dark coat was not English-bred she said; he was imported. They did not quite know his origin, not even his mistress; but his name was Omar Khayyam. The grey was called Hafez.

“And your own name?” said the man, holding out his cup for more tea. “This is good!”

“Yes, my friend blends it herself.—My name is Vervain Chalmont.”

“Vervain means ‘enchantment!’”

"I know. I am very fond of my name. It really is mine, too."

"You mean you were christened Vervain?"

"No—I was registered!"

He experienced the faint repugnance that he would have done if she had said she was divorced. He was not by any means a religious man, but the rites of some Church or other seemed as decent as the christening robe that hid the baby's nakedness. It occurred to him that she must have come of very queer people, and placed her a little lower yet in the social scale to his mind. A woman who accepted your escort without hesitation, asked you into an empty flat, and made you take off your coat and gave you tea, might well have started without the decency of an ordinary christening. There is something respectable in a christening that suggests god-parents and open matrimony and regular habits of all kinds. People who register their babies may not even be married!

"What is *your* name?" said the girl, biting a neat half circle out of her toast and looking appreciatively at the six clean little incisions made by her teeth in the butter. It was almost like the wax model made by a dentist, and she thought how even her front teeth were and did not notice her companion's momentary hesitation before he lied to her.

"Ted Egerton to my friends!" he said with a slight smile to cover his prevarication. "I wonder if I might smoke in this delightful kitchen?"

"I often do!" said his hostess, handing him the matches. "I say! your coat is soaking—you won't be able to go yet awhile."

"I am in no hurry," he assured her, and lit a cigarette with an appreciative glance at her slight figure bestowed in the armchair which obviously did not belong to the kitchen but had been brought in to serve her need. It was a low basket chair, roomy enough for a dozen such girls, and she sat with one leg tucked under her and Omar Khayyam curled round in her lap, a great spread of black and reddish fur which she touched delicately now and again with her thin hand. He had never seen anybody stroke a cat quite as lightly or tenderly as that, and he wondered what the feeling of such a touch might be like. Yet it was remarkable that he knew he might not approach an inch nearer to her, or attempt a familiarity. He had certainly looked for—well, something a little different when he entered the flat. It seemed comical that the cat should be sitting on her knee instead of her sitting on his. And he smiled again, angrily this time, to realise that when he said good-bye to her he must only venture to press her hand—if that.

He had been many years out of England, with only short leave at intervals, and he had not recognised the gradual development of the modern woman's independence from the fashions of his mother's day. He told her a little about himself while they sat over the fire in the raw April evening, smoking; and some of it was fact and some was fiction. He was thirty-three, and he had not the least idea that he was thirteen years older than the thin, restless specimen of humanity sharing the kitchen with him. If he had had, he might have given her a small lecture on the risks she ran in carrying on like this with an unknown man, and advised her very

kindly about pitfalls in the London streets of which she knew far more than he, and then gone away—a little inclined to moralise and regret. But these extra six or seven years with which he had endowed her seemed to make all the difference. A young woman of six or seven and twenty knew her way about—ought to, at any rate—and had asked for trouble rather than avoided it. It behoved a man to be careful, and to secure himself, in case she should prove deeper than she seemed. So he told her the truth about his age and his various appointments abroad which had ended in the Woods and Forests in British Moldavia; and he told her a lie about his name. Having covered his tracks so far it did not matter telling her the truth again about his circumstances at home, which he did. His mother had died when he first went abroad, and his father had married again, a widow with four small children. They were now growing up into big boys and girls, and it was natural that their young lives should be the immediate interest in the home circle. Ted found himself out of touch and out of place when he went home, and after the usual perfunctory visit to the old house in Gloucestershire he had come up to Town to finish his leave by such enjoyment as he could get out of his Club, and theatres, and restaurants—civilisation unobtainable in the bush. But the loneliness of his woods and forests seemed to cling about him even in London. The girl had felt his habit of silence, gained in the jungle, and she was quick to divine that his friends were really mere acquaintances and that he was somewhat at a loose end in his search for diversion. He would go back again to the silence, and be more at home in the dense growths,

with no life but the lizards and the great butterflies to which he referred with unconscious artistry so that she saw immense gloom suddenly dashed with coloured wings in a clearing, and sensed the Tropics. He found no need to lie about his work, and had told her the truth again in stating that his leave was up in May, and that he must spend another week with his people before he sailed; and then he built a new fortress of untruth in explaining to her that he was thinking of settling down—there was a lady in Rio de Janeiro—things would be openly announced on his return to South America. This was to preclude the possibility of her having any futile hope of capturing a husband through their chance acquaintance, and once he had made his misstatement he felt much more free to do and say what he pleased.

The girl looked at him with thoughtful, intelligent eyes, and accepted his lies and truth together with frank courtesy. She had not the faintest idea of what was passing through his mind, and did not conceive the complicated motives that had made him weave his net of deceit. She found him, indeed, very interesting, and her changing face followed the ebb and flow of his story like a looking-glass reflecting his own mood. He even saw his own boredom and discomfort in her eyes when amongst his step-brothers and sisters, and the excitement of taking up a new "job" when he went to Moldivia. They were wonderfully expressive, those eyes, and wonderfully sad. Now that he had so carefully secured his own position he resented it that he was making no advance with her—no physical advance, at any rate. She was simply interested in him. No more.

"Now tell me all about yourself," he said, after his

own recital had ended at Rio with a mythical fiancée in the offing. "You have been working in an office for four years, didn't you say? I suppose you are about six or seven-and-twenty?"

"More or less," she answered with a slight hesitation in her turn, and coloured, inexplicably ashamed of her youth. He put it down to the motives which would have influenced his mother's contemporaries—always his standard.

"Come! you are not so old that you can't admit your age!" he said laughing, with the intent to tease the colour into her pale face, in which he succeeded. She flushed uncomfortably, and slurred over dates throughout her sketch of her own career, afraid to own that she had left school at sixteen lest he should calculate too effectively. In this she was not more honest than he, but it had not been a premeditated deception.

"I was educated at a kind of Charity School," she explained. "It was a very good education for next to no money, and it was carried out in an immense building that was never warmed in the Winter. I always think of my childhood as a series of draughts and chilblains, and huge tough joints. As we grew older we were some of us allowed to carve for ourselves. That was a great relief, because we simply didn't eat anything."

"What about the holidays?"

"I used to go home with a school friend. My parents were dead long since, and I had no settled home. Netta's people were awfully good to me. I went to them when I left school, until I could get to work."

"Is Netta the lady who owns this flat?"

"Oh dear no—Netta is a worker like myself. Her mother died two years ago, and the home was broken up when the brother married. She has a room in the same house where I really lodge. But we respect each other's privacy."

"Then who is the owner of this flat?"

"A Mrs. Seymour—a widow. I met her through the C.W.L. where I work as secretary, and she has been very good to me. She has private means, of course," she added off-handedly.

"Isn't it possible to be kind without private means?"

"Not the same kind of kindness. She would not nurse me if I were ill, and I should not borrow of her if I were starving. But she turns life round to me on the coloured side, and shows me that it is there—or I might forget."

She gave a little laugh that ended in a rising sigh. He began to recognise that she always laughed like that, and to listen for it.

"I do not think a picture book is much good to a hungry child, or one who is sick!" he said gently, turning the cigarette in his fingers and looking at that rather than at her.

"Oh!"—she raised her hands over her head with a gesture that seemed almost frenzied. He saw the two thin little fists clenched and her arms tremble with her tightened muscles. "*'Man cannot live by bread alone'*"—I am so tired of working for my body's need and having to starve my soul. The stupid, clumsy thing that must eat and drink and be warm and rested, leaves no time to look round and experience and enjoy!"

He laughed shortly. "Your little body does not look

to me particularly stupid or clumsy," he said. "And I expect it gives you a good deal of enjoyment?"—He glanced at her now, but either she did not understand or passed the challenge.

"It costs a good deal," she said quaintly. "I am so often hungrier than my meals."

"What do they pay you at this precious League or Society of yours?"

"Eighty pounds a year."

"You can't live on that!" He was startled for the first time. His own salary was a thousand a year, owing to the exigencies of the climate and conditions that he had to face; and he had private means as well, though small ones. He knew next to nothing of women's wage in England, but he had always vaguely supposed that the poorest clerkship carried two pounds a week with it. The period before the great War, however, was one when female employment had reached a stage that was calling for active remedy like other acute evils.

Her grey eyes widened in genuine surprise. "It's very good!" she said. "I only began at fifty, and that *was* a pull! I grew so thin that even the Committee noticed it, and thought they had better feed me instead of the Colonists. They give me my lunch now, and I do all right."

She spoke carelessly, and with real though cynical amusement over her semi-starvation; but she had made him so uncomfortable that he was glad to make an excuse of finishing his cigarette and ending the odd, haphazard visit. The vision of her, young, hungry, living in a "combined" room and working hard for the right to exist at all, laid its hand upon him and thrust

him back from the idle advantage he half meant to take. He had thought furtively of putting his hand on her shoulder and feeling if a tentative pressure would draw her to him. If she resisted there was no harm done. If not, things might progress along the usual lines. But she had shocked him into a momentary forgetfulness of self and the promptings of male traditions. She held out her hand to him as if she also had been a man, and he wrung it as if he had said "poor fellow!"

"I am awfully glad to have met you," she said frankly. "It was something of an adventure, wasn't it? I hope you'll get on all right when you go back to the jungle—I wish I were you!"

"But I'm coming to see you again," he protested, a little resentful that she should take his final departure so much for granted. "Surely you'll let me come and see you again! You are going to be here for a time, are you not?"

"I am here for three weeks yet," said the girl. "But I'm not often in as early as I was to-day. They let me off because the Hon. Sec. was there, and wanted to talk to some of the League Members herself. I seldom get home till six. I meant to go for a walk this afternoon—but the rain spoilt it." She looked resentfully at the darkening windows. "It isn't usual for me to get a walk by daylight, except to and from the office."

"Surely you have Sundays?"

"Not always. If a mail boat comes in and there are some of our Members travelling by her I may have to go and meet them. And sometimes I spend the day in bed. I do really."

"At your age? Lazy little woman! I shall come and take you for a walk on Sunday. May I?"

It struck her as a little suggestive of "walking out" with a young man met by chance or on probation; but she did not say so. She laughed and told him not to come too early or she might not be up, and no one would answer the door; and then he went and the girl stood for a minute listening to the echo of the hall door closing, and the sound of the lift bell, with a curious, speculative expression on her face. Omar Khayyam, annoyed that she had disturbed him to speed the parting guest, thrust his lion-head against her ankles with the smallest mew that ever a large cat gave. She stooped and picked him up, laying him gently against her shoulder as if he were a tired child.

"Omar," she said thoughtfully, "you've got a beard!" And she pressed her lips to the great upstanding ruff as if for a dainty experiment.

CHAPTER II

"For a dream cometh through the multitude of business;
and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words."

—*Ecclesiastes.*

VERVAIN CHALMONT'S life was like that of a rabbit for six months of the year, or rather of some nocturnal animal, since she lived mostly underground and saw but little daylight. During the Winter months she started from her "combined" room by dubious and drab daylight, since she had to be at the office by nine-thirty, and the office was in Essex Street, Strand, while her dwelling-place was in Tachbrook Street, Vauxhall Bridge Road. When she got home again between six and seven it was dark, or nearly so, and the fact that her room was immediately under the roof was no advantage to her. The Colonial Women's League boasted ever-growing premises in the basement of a large building in Essex Street, the upper floors of which were taken up by newspaper offices and printing works, the stairs being in consequence of the most carpetless description, and a constant record of muddy boots. Up and down, up and down those stairs went the hum of events, coming in from the outside world in mysterious forms to issue out in piles of printed matter; and the noise, and the echo of it, and the singularly unfurnished atmosphere that haunts such places, never altered for the seasons. One would have been as startled

to recognise a dusty sunbeam across the enquiry counter of the "Daily Record," or "Feminine Fancies" a floor higher, as one would a Turkey carpet on the floor. But the newspapers, at any rate, had the advantage of prosaic daylight, though Summer and Winter meant no more to them than a few hours of it increased or lessened; down below in the basement it was always night, artificially lighted, save on the longest days of Summer when the clubrooms, though not the Secretary's office, could save electricity.

For there were two rooms attached to the official premises of the C.W.L. in which the Colonial members might obtain a meal or write letters (stationery was to be obtained of the Secretary, three sheets a penny in pre-War days), or read a few papers on whose free list the League was on account of small advertisements. The League hoped to extend the rooms some day into a real Club, for even the small dining-room was paying its way, and the staff was often overworked since it consisted of a cook-housekeeper and one waitress. But the League was apt to overwork its officials, from the harassed Hon. Treasurer down to the Lady Helpers (also honorary) who undertook to meet Colonial women arriving in England for the first time by boat or train, and to bring them safely to the premises in Essex Street where they were "advised" as to hotels or lodgings or shops or "what to see," or how to reach a provincial destination. There were sister Leagues in most of the Colonies which handed on travelling members, and the subscription being the nominal half-crown or shilling, according to social status, the institution did not lack moral support though it might financial. It was really

a charitable fad—a fad of Lady Mercia's as Vervain had said, and run by voluntary contributions. Had it been self-supporting it might have afforded larger salaries to those of the staff who were not honorary; but the dining-room was, so far, the only thing that had paid. It was in the dining-room that Miss Chalmont had her lunch since it had been conceded to her by the Committee, and her tea was brought to her in the office; so that between the hours of nine-thirty and six o'clock—it was frequently six—she had no occasion to leave the office, and lived like a rabbit, underground.

On the morning after her adventure in the rain she arrived if anything a little before her time and hung up her rain-coat and hat with a sudden revulsion of realising that she must have done the same sort of thing about twelve hundred times, deducting Sundays and her annual holidays. It was not raining this morning, but she was not going to be caught a second time. If she had not worn the rain-coat there would have been some other outer garment to take off and hang up in orderly routine. The girl smoothed her silky dark hair before the small glass over the wash-hand basin, saw that her appearance was as tidy and unobtrusive as office rule demanded, and went into the Secretary's room feeling that she hated order and routine with the whole strength of a forceful nature. Something of this no doubt was due to the fact that her holiday was drawing near again, and that for twelve months she had gone on hanging up rain-coats and hats and looking at herself in the office glass without anything to disturb the regular habit save Sundays. Something also was due to a fleeting glimpse through other eyes of a larger

life—a life of long ocean voyages, and tropical forests, and work which might be solitary but could never, never be monotonous to her vivid mind! Between the offices of the C.W.L. and British Moldivia was a great gulf fixed, over which her winged fancy flung a rainbow bridge and teased her with invitations to day-dream—just to day-dream of it, since she might never experience its gorgeous possibilities of change and adventure. Egerton had drawn tantalising pictures in the few phrases he had dropped of trees so massed together that nothing could grow amongst their sunless trunks, of miraculous insect life, of the weight of silence, of the sullen flood of unexplored rivers.

She thrust the thoughts away. The C.W.L. paid her £1 10s. 9¼d., or thereabouts, for some fifty hours' work in the week, and she did her best to see that they got their money's worth. There was the morning's post to see to—an unusually heavy one—letters to be answered, or to be referred to the Honorary Secretary, a mail boat to be met since she brought Members on their first voyage, another Colonist to be "seen off" in a day or so, half a dozen things to arrange and to tabulate. And through the customary correspondence, and the similar cases that she had settled and referred and filed a hundred times, flashed the wings of great butterflies before her mental eyes, and the sunless aisles of primeval forests, and all the strange enchanting life of British Moldivia. . . .

Then the telephone bell rang. Away with British Moldivia! At the other end of the wire one of the Committee was waiting to talk to Miss Chalmont about papers for the recreation room.

"Oh, good morning, Miss Chalmont! Are you there?" (It was rather obvious that a secretary must be there who had just answered the telephone call!) "It's about those papers for the recreation room. I met the Editor of *Feminine Fancies* last night, and he promised to put us on the free list—he's in the same building, you know. I think it will be so nice for ladies who are just putting in time at the League—quite a good paper for the purpose, don't you think?"

"Quite!" said Vervain, and the Committee member could not see the face she made. "Will the Editor send the weekly issue to us, or would you like us to send up to *Feminine Fancies*?"

"Oh, he'll send down—or if he forgets it I'll just run in there next time I'm at the office, because he *knows* me, you see. Just to remind him. I think that would be better."

"Certainly!"

Again that expressive grimace at the receiver, which kept its countenance well.

"Oh, Miss Chalmont—Miss Chalmont, are you there?"

"Yes!"

"There's a lady coming to the office this morning—she's a friend of Mrs. Seymour, and she wants to write a letter or lunch or something. Will you see that she has particular attention?"

"Yes? What is her name?" said Vervain, with a glance at the waiting work and neglected correspondence on the table.

"Mrs. Jackson. Did you get the name? *Jackson*."

"Yes, I've got the name. Is the lady a Member, or does she come as Mrs. Seymour's private friend?"

"Oh, she's a Member, or she ought to be. Her husband is a District Commissioner in British Moldivia. Thank you so much! Good-bye."

So British Moldivia flamed up again amidst the office files, and the humdrum round of seeing that Committee ladies were satisfied and their friends attended to—flamed up with its jewels of butterflies fluttering round the little silken head that Vervain tried to keep free of them, and dazzled her eyes that might not dream with visions of rich, poisonous flowers, and strange scents, and sullen, unexplored rivers . . .

How strange to be the wife of a District Commissioner in British Moldivia! She was glad that the lady was a friend of Mrs. Seymour, since Mrs. Seymour formed a connecting link that would outlast a chance acquaintance in the rain, and Mrs. Seymour could, if she would, supply information about District Commissioners and their lives. What *was* a District Commissioner? Would his work bring him into connection with the Woods and Forests? What was——

Miss Chalmont put down the receiver with a jerk, and returned to her office table, reproached by the spectre of that £1 10s. 9¼d. that she was not earning. She fought doggedly through another hour, resisting British Moldivia and its butterflies, and heard the click of the door with positive relief as a respite from the fixing of her attention on the petty cash. It was another Member of the Committee—an Inspecting Member—who undertook to keep an eye on the office occasionally, and on its youthful Secretary. For Miss Chalmont's age was known to the League in its naked truth, since they had taken her as typist and stenographer at seventeen, and raised her to

the dignity of her present post two years later, having proved her sufficiently reliable. The Inspecting Member of Committee approved herself in Vervain's eyes on account of her clothes. She was good to look at, despite certain peculiarities that might prove harrowing to an overworked secretary.

"Good morning, Miss Chalmont. Hard at work I see!"

"The post was very heavy," said Vervain, with a courteous and restrained smile. "Would you look at this letter, Mrs. St. Ledger? I do not know if I ought to forward it to the Honorary Secretary to refer it to Committee. It is hardly within our scope, I think."

"H'm—h'm—Lady from the West Indies wants her little boy taken care of for some hours while she shops! Well really! Tiresome woman! What are we to do?"

"Shall we point out to her that the League is strictly limited to ladies, and that her nominee is a gentleman?"

"Yes, certainly"—Mrs. St. Ledger laughed. "But then he's a *little* boy!"

"Well, shall we say that we are not a crèche? All the Members are adults!"

"I don't know *what* to say! So awkward that she should be a Colonist herself?" She put down the letter on the table, and began to walk about the room restlessly. "You ought to have some curtains in this room to screen that window. Everybody going by in the passage can look in. Don't you think some art green curtains would look nice? Curtain cloth is quite cheap."

"Yes, very nice. I suppose that is a question for the Finance Committee, and comes under office expenditure."

"I'll see to it—I'm on the Finance. It would cost very

little. I'm sure it would add to the look of the room. I hate that bare window! It glares at me. Don't you think casement cloth would look well?"

"Charming. Then shall I refer this letter to the General Committee?"

"What letter?"

"The West Indian lady's?"

"Oh, for goodness sake don't put anything extra on the General! We sat for three hours last time because Lady Evelyn got arguing with everybody over some little outside question that did not concern us at all. If you give her the West Indian lady to play with she will keep us till seven o'clock—and no tea!"

"I am so sorry. Tea should have been brought in to the committee room. I will see to it another time."

"You were not there, were you?"

"No. Lady Mercia decided that somebody must go to the Sandwich Islands bazaar (you know we had a stall), and there was no one else available."

"Now isn't that like the President! Why couldn't she send one of her own maids? What's the use of a Secretary who isn't present at General Committee to prompt the honorary officials? Oh, it's not *your* fault, my dear! You look worn to death as it is. Now do go and have a good lunch—we are all so anxious you should have decent meals! I'll stay and look after the office while you feed."

"But Mrs. St. Ledger—thanks awfully!—but what *am* I to do with the West Indian lady? Shall I send her on to the Honorary Secretary?"

"Yes—here, I'll do it while you have your lunch. Where is the stationery? Oh, and the stamps? And,

Miss Chalmont; which letter is it? I've put it down somewhere and lost it."

Vervain retrieved the letter from the lady's own hand-bag, and went reluctantly, knowing that both letters and table would be chaos when she returned. She ate a hurried lunch, aware all the time that she was keeping Mrs. St. Ledger waiting, and returned to find her measuring the windows for the new curtains. The Visiting Member wasted another ten minutes in desultory talk, and then departed to her own leisurely luncheon, happy in the conviction that she had done her duty by the League, relieved the tired girl-secretary, and discovered a long-felt want in casement-cloth curtains.

The drab of Vervain's afternoon was barred with a streak of colour in the advent of Mrs. Jackson. The District Commissioner's wife had taken many shapes and forms in her mind before she arrived, and never the right one. She proved to be a slender woman with a fretful face and the immature voice of a child. That voice would drive one mad in a week, Vervain decided, and wondered why the District Commissioner had not murdered her. Children's voices had never struck her as pretty; they were, on the contrary, too flat in tone, and almost nasal. But she accepted them as she would have done the squeaky mew of a kitten or the high yap of a puppy. In a grown-up being it was intolerable. Mrs. Jackson had a quick, sharp way of glancing sideways like a squirrel, and her manner was rather affected.

"I want to write some letters, if I may pay for the stationery," she said, after announcing her name and Mrs. Seymour's introduction. "Do I write in here?"

"No, in the recreation room, please. I will show you,"

said the Secretary, rising and leading the way down the passage to the clubrooms. "I think there is everything here for use. But if I can be of any further assistance please call me. Would you like some tea?"

"Can I have it here?" asked Mrs. Jackson in a fatigued tone. It seemed to have bored her to walk down the passage and into the recreation room, and she sat at the writing table in an exhausted fashion.

"Oh, yes. I will tell the housekeeper to bring it. Will you please pay her for both tea and stationery and that will be one bill."

"Thank you." Mrs. Jackson turned her back at once, and absorbed herself in her writing. For a minute Vervain looked at the ash-coloured hair and the sallow skin with wide, wistful eyes. She longed to ask questions, to find out if this woman had ever been in British Moldivia herself; but there was no encouragement in Mrs. Jackson's manner to anything but the answering of her questions and the supplying of her wants, and Vervain turned away with a sense of discouragement heavier than had been on her all day. Perhaps it was a tropical climate that had induced that unwholesome languor in the lady, but she affected Vervain like a miasmatic wind.

"*Poisonous* is the word for her!" she thought. "That voice and that face together would be enough to drive any man to crime. I wish I knew the District Commissioner that I might tell him how sorry I am for him!"

And yet Mrs. Jackson was not a plain woman, and not past youth. She looked unhealthy, and she was very quietly selfish; but these two qualities need not make her repulsive to the world at large, had Vervain been old enough to see it. Her health became a factor in her

favour, with the pitiful, and her selfishness was an unconscious thing that merely prompted her to make use of the advantage. Men, in particular, always petted her ailments, and called her "that poor little woman!" and she had a large masculine acquaintance. But the shrewdest twenty years are apt to go wide in judging of character and personality. Miss Chalmont's summing up of Mrs. Jackson was that she was unattractive; but had they been pitted against each other she would assuredly have found that the older woman put her completely in the shade despite her youth and some originality. Mrs. Jackson did not appear in the Secretary's office again. She wrote her letters and ordered her tea in the recreation room, after which she presumably left without thanks or further acknowledgment, though Vervain still clung to the chance of a word dropped by her that might open the gates to British Moldivia and its butterflies.

At half-past four the waitress of the clubroom brought her a cup of tea and some biscuits into the office, and the Secretary slacked work, pushing the tendrils of her seal-coloured hair from her forehead with a sigh that was as impatient as tired. She felt jaded, and had a sudden pettish impulse to push everything off the table—ink, pens, letters, postal directory, file—with one glorious crash on the floor, and drop her head in her hands and sob. Life was too narrow and regulated at twenty between the walls of this office and its artificial light! A breath of the Spring seemed to float in through the open shaft of the upper window and remind her that even in Essex Street it was April. . . .

"*'A dream cometh,'*" quoted Vervain under-breath—



"A dream cometh through the multitude of business!"

Into her large dissatisfied eyes there crept the vision of things denied to girlhood subsisting on £1 10s. 9¼d. a week; in an embryo form it was the same look that leads to revolutions, and lynch law, and the ruin of nations and individuals alike. A good statesman and a good cook alike know the moment when a simmering fluid is likely to boil over; but the Committee of the C.W.L. were neither statesmen nor cooks, and merely remarking that Miss Chalmont looked hungry they voted her a free lunch.

Those revolutionary eyes, wandering round the narrow confines of the office, altered suddenly from feverish dreams to everyday interest. There was a tap on the door, and somebody was looking in over the glazed portion of the glass, evidently standing on tip-toe to do it. Then the door opened cautiously and a tall girl entered and closed it firmly behind her.

"All alone?" she said. "What luck! I was afraid one of your Titles might have brought their fancy-work to sit with you!"

"They came earlier in the day," said Vervain grimly. "Would you like a cup of tea, Netta?"

"No thanks, old lady, I'm on my way home. Nolly is coming. He's got a week's sick leave."

"Anything wrong?"

"Not very much—it's his throat again. He went to the medical officer belonging to his Company and they granted him a week's leave right off."

"Men do have luck!" said Vervain cynically. "You and I don't get sick leave for anything but infection."

"There is nobody to take our places, you see—we are

too important! Women always take the single-handed jobs. I say, Vervie, I'm awfully sorry that I shan't be able to look you up for a few days. You see, Nolly doesn't want to spend money on going away, so we shall get about together as soon as I can rush home."

"All right," said Vervain sympathetically. "Will they let you off any earlier?"

"I've got Thursday afternoon. Mr. Webb wants to come down and look through the advertising department himself. I just rushed in to tell you not to expect me, I should have been round yesterday, only Nolly came to tell me. I thought you might have come to me."

"It was too wet to go out—I stayed in and read," said Vervain quite truthfully, and yet withholding half the truth. "I had an adventure in the rain," she added, with a little laugh that ended in a sigh. "A man walked with me from the Tube to share his umbrella. I had none." But she did not say that she had asked him in to tea, or that he had come. Some occult sense of the difference between her and Netta Pullman told her that what she could do Netta could not, and that Netta would judge the incident from her own point of view. Netta was engaged to be married to Oliver Bate, who was a clerk in an insurance office; and they had made acquaintance through attendance at the same place of worship where they went to hear a famous preacher. It was, indeed, the preacher who had made the introduction, knowing both of his young devotees personally, and the affair had been thus socially sponsored. Most of Netta's happenings were properly regulated, and she was not adventurous. But though eight years older than Vervain Chalmont the younger girl found herself in-

variably the more executive of the two, and she knew that she must strike out her path for herself and irrespective of Netta.

"Good-bye—don't worry. I'll see you after Nolly's leave is up," she said, as her friend hurried off, and turned back to the last distasteful hour of her work before she could put on the rain-coat again and go back to her empty flat and the cats. Yesterday's companionship made it seem a little more empty in anticipation; but after all adventures do not happen every day, and she was honest enough to say to herself that she did not envy Netta—not exactly. To be engaged to Nolly and to hurry back to tea with him would not have fulfilled the Dream that came through the multitude of Business. And yet she felt a little wistfully that there was no need for her to hurry home. She did not want Nolly, indeed, but she lingered a moment over the thought of the tie that would have meant someone permanently belonging to her. Acquaintances, even flirtations, were ephemeral. She had experienced both, and she was still a lonely unit in an indifferent world.

There was at least no occasion to stay at the office to-day after half-past five. Vervain came up into the upper air and the April evening in daylight, and noted jealously that she would still have an hour before the sun set. She thought of a walk, but though the evening was fine it was sunless, and the level grey sky depressed her. It was more inviting to go home and sit over the fire with the cats, nursing the Dream that had come through the multitude of Business. Now at least for a blessed space she had leave to dream, since it did not trench on that £1 10s. 9¼d., and her discontent had

reached a pitch that must be wrestled with and put away before to-morrow and its routine of work.

"I want my holiday!" said Vervain, as she entered Marston Mansions. "I want it very badly. That is it. Thank the Gods that I am to have it in May this year. For I feel as if I could do something rather dreadful. . . ."

The stolid lift-boy took no more notice of her in her solitary condition than he did yesterday when she had a companion. He did not tell her that anyone had called, or had left a message, either; but then she had not expected one. No one was likely to ask for her except Netta, who had come to the office. And yesterday's visitor was not to be expected until Sunday—if then. Probably he would think better of it by Sunday, and not come. The lift-boy must presumably have seen anybody who entered the Mansions, even if they chose to walk up four flights of stairs and not to use the lift, and he let Miss Chalmont depart to her flat unwarned; yet as she reached the front door someone walked up the last few steps of the staircase and came deliberately towards her down the passage.

"You said you were home about six o'clock, so I timed it nicely," said Ted Egerton, as he raised his hat. "How do you do? No need of it to-day, so I see you carry an umbrella!"

They both laughed, and the girl opened the door and admitted him without question. In her heart she was a good deal surprised, and so curious that she could not bear to let him go without finding out the motive of his return. For a minute, indeed, she wondered if he had left anything in the flat—his cigarette case, for instance

—that had escaped her, and whether the charwoman had seen it.

"You said you were coming on Sunday!" she said quietly, opening the drawing-room door this time and not suggesting the kitchen.

"You didn't think I should wait till Sunday, did you?" he said, pausing in the doorway. The drawing-room was a very pretty room, and charmingly furnished. The fire was laid, and the girl knelt down in front of it to light it, as she answered.

"Yes, I did. You told me you were spending your leave by doing all the things in London that you can't do in the jungle. (Do sit down!) I did not wonder at all. If I were you I daresay I should simply cram them in!"

He walked up to a deliciously deep armchair and drawing it to the fire sat down in it, his arms resting on his knees as he leaned forward to look at her. "May one smoke here?" he said.

"Oh yes—I can open the windows. Mrs. Davies always leaves them closed on account of burglars! I suppose she thinks they will come in flying machines." Then as they both laughed again she said carelessly, "I think it was rather nice of you not to wait until Sunday."

"I came because I wanted to see you without your hat," he said deliberately, as he lit a cigarette. "Do take it off! You look so formal in your outdoor clothes, as if you wanted to remind me that I must not stay long."

"I will go and attend to the cats, and make myself respectable, if you will amuse yourself," she said ami-

cably. "There are plenty of books and pictures, and you can try the piano if you like."

There were indeed some very good water-colours on the walls, as he discovered by strolling round the room. Mrs. Seymour had not only money but taste. But he did not play on the piano, or open any of the books, and when Vervain came back he was sitting in the same attitude, looking into the fire, his cigarette between his fingers.

He looked up rather quickly as she entered. She had the larger of the two cats in her arms—the one she called Omar Khayyam—and she had taken sufficient time to change her office clothes. He knew that in a minute, and appropriated it as a compliment to himself, allowing nothing for a certain fastidiousness in her. As a matter of fact she would have made the change anyhow, before she sat down to indulge her dreams over the fire, for she disliked the very feeling of the garments she had worn all day; but that he could not conceive. At the foundations of her nature was a refinement that no harsh upbringing could eradicate, though it had made her a bit of a *gamin* in certain ways. She resembled a princess playing a street Arab, but his interest being piqued by the Arab he discounted the princess.

"That is very much better!" he said, wheeling up a second chair for her, beside his own. "Now I feel that we are really friendly. Tell me what you have been doing all day? Have you been busy?"

"Very! We have decided that it is necessary to have casement cloth curtains in the Secretary's room. I think that was our most important effort."

"I thought you said it was a kind of League which

sent you to meet helpless Colonial ladies at the Docks?"

"So it is—only there were no boats arriving to-day as it happened. We had several Colonists lunching at the League rooms. And, by the way, there was a lady from British Moldivia—a curious coincidence, wasn't it?"

He did not speak for a moment. It flashed through his mind as a very tiresome coincidence if it were any one who knew him and this girl got talking about the Colony. And women always gossiped.

"Who was she?" he asked shortly.

"A Mrs. Jackson, the wife of a District Commissioner. I hardly spoke to her—but I was longing to ask if she had been out there and seen the butterflies!"

His relief was so instant that his smile was almost caressing as he looked at her. "I know who you mean. She does not go out with her husband, the climate is too much for her—poor little woman! What made you so interested in the butterflies?"

"What you said—that they looked like great jewels, or winged flowers, floating out into the sunlight in a cleared space of the jungle! They have been flying round my head all day."

She put her hands up to her eyes as if she really saw the wonderful wings and would brush them away. This time there was no doubt about the caress in his voice as he spoke.

"I wish I could show them to you! I have sent heaps home to my young step-brother. I had no idea you were so imaginative. You struck me as a very practical little person yesterday—a regular business woman!"

"I suppose I am," said Vervain slowly. And then the quotation that had haunted her all the afternoon

found expression on her lips. "‘But a Dream cometh through the multitude of Business’—and the butterflies came to me."

This new mood of hers was again tantalising. She looked softer and more approachable without her hat, and the rings of silky dark hair threw light shadows into her wide, clear eyes. They were still too sad, but they were not so cynical, and he thought the fine pink lips almost prettier for the lack of colour in her cheeks. He was quite sure now that she was attractive, and he knew that he was attracted. And yet he was as far as ever from the very material kind of flirtation he had expected. It was absurd, of course, alone with her in a flat to which she had practically invited him, but he really was half afraid to touch her. It was with unwonted reticence that he ventured to lay his hand lightly on her arm, and that only as if in a gentle kindness.

"I want you to tell me more about yourself," he said. "Have you absolutely no relations?"

"Indeed, I have, but they are so far off that they might as well be dead. I have an elder sister named Ivy who is married to a man in Western Canada, but they never come home because they cannot leave the farm. And I have two brothers—one is dead," she said abruptly.

The hand on her arm tightened sympathetically. "Don't tell me if you don't want to," he said.

"I do not mind." But her voice was a little hard. "He speculated unwisely, and got into trouble," she said. "It was fortunate that he died just in time! My other brother is somewhere in the Klondyke. No one ever hears from him."

Not very efficient guardians for a girl working for her

own living, or likely to interfere with her. He did not know that he calculated on the remote chance of having to render an account of his own share in her life, should it come to that, but the chance certainly looked remote. He recognised immediately that it was the lack of money that rendered her relations a negligible quantity in dealing with her.

"How was it that you were brought up alone, as you told me yesterday, and obliged to make your way in the world?" he asked. "There is generally some family life when children are quite young."

"We were all divided and farmed out as it were, as babies," said Vervain indifferently. "My father never could keep money. He had means of his own as a young man, but somehow they all went. He was a Socialist in the days when Socialism had no funds to speak of, and did *not* pay! He was a very advanced thinker for his time, but he died when we were all little more than babies, and my mother was very helpless. She kept the two boys with her as long as she lived, and her up-bringing ruined them. I never met either of them until I was grown up, and then—they were rather a shock." She laughed that rising laugh that ended in a sigh. "My sister and I were taken by my mother's family and provided for as best could be. I was sent to school when I was eight, and Ivy was brought up by some farmer people with their own little girl. That was how she met her husband, and they emigrated."

"Did you know your sister better than your brothers?"

"Very little. We met just before she went to Canada, and the idea was that if they made their way I might go out to them. But they have never been able to do

more than make a bare living, and it is a terribly hard life. They certainly did not want another mouth to feed! And who was to pay my fare out?"

"I see. Was your sister older than you?"

"They were all older than I." She withdrew her arm, as if unconsciously, from his touch, and began to stroke Omar gently but mechanically, while her liquid eyes were fixed on the fire. The cat's booming purr filled the silence, and it struck Egerton as mockingly domestic to sit here with this London vagabond of a girl beside the fire, the sleepy cat on her lap, their two chairs side by side. If the flat had really been hers, and they had met conventionally—if, in fact, she had been a girl with relations round her, or even with independent means, how differently things would have looked. But as it was he might just as well take the goods the gods provided.

"I'm dining out with some men, to-night," he said at last, looking at his watch and rising. "But I want you to come and dine somewhere with me to-morrow. Will you?"

Her eyes came back from their long gaze into the heart of the fire, a little startled. But he could not tell if it were because of his proposal or because he had roused her from her dream.

"No, I don't know that I will," she said quite coolly, and rising also. "You see it is so unpleasant accepting a hospitality that you cannot return. If I could give you dinner here I should not mind, but I should have to cook it, and I don't know if you would appreciate it when cooked! And I can't afford to ask you to a restaurant, myself. If you don't mind dining at one

of the little places in Soho and sharing expenses, that is different."

"But my dear girl," he said impatiently, "you can't expect me to let you pay for yourself! Now do be reasonable, and come along and be good to me. I have told you that I am having a 'bust' up in London, before I go back to the solitude of the bush, and why on earth can't I ask a lady to dinner without her asking me back?"

"You can—so long as she is not a working woman," said Vervain dryly. "Somehow it alters the situation. 'To them that hath shall be given.' Because we have to work for ourselves we must pay for ourselves. But I'll come this once if you like, and if you won't go to a very expensive place."

"You will come—as often as I ask you, and that will quite possibly be every day!" he said, dropping his hands suddenly on her shoulders and holding her before him to look down at her. He thought he realised a capitulation in her acceptance of the dinner, and it made him more daring. "And I shall take you to any restaurant I like. Haven't you got any frocks? Is that the trouble?"

"I have an evening gown—it is a necessary adjunct to my work should the Committee ask me out," she said rather quickly. If he had offered to buy her a gown the Adventure must come to an end then and there, and it still tempted her. She did not attempt to move away from him, but those clear sad eyes looked up into his without fear or wavering—and it was his hands that dropped from her shoulders and left her free. The girl's lips curled in a small, fine smile.

"I will call for you at half-past seven to-morrow," he said, speaking lightly to hide a vague discomfiture. "Look you prettiest, and—be good to me!"

The words struck her as uttered for the second time. How often she was to recognise them in the future, not only through this man's lips but as symbolic.

"That depends on how good you are to me," she said whimsically. "I never can see why women should have all the giving and none of the receiving. And I would rather meet you at the restaurant, please."

He turned in leaving, looking at her doubtfully. "I am afraid you won't turn up, or you will send me a wire to say you are waiting for me somewhere in Soho." He did not relish the idea of the little stuffy places in Soho. So-called Bohemianism did not appeal to him.

"No, nonsense! If I say I will come, I will. I always keep my word."

"Always?"

"Always. That is a business habit. Where am I to meet you?"

"Oddonino's—the Café Imperial," he translated, not recognising that true Londoners know every noted house in town though they may not go there.

She nodded. "Very well—but it's too smart, and I shan't come again. I'll come this time as I have promised."

He wondered, as he walked down the stairs again to avoid the lift boy, whether it were true, and that she would not do him credit. Perhaps it *was* too smart for her, and she would look what she was—a little underpaid secretary, wearing her one evening gown for the

unusual treat of a good dinner. But he knew few people in London, and it did not matter. The dinner, anyhow, marked another stage in the acquaintance. And he did not mean it to be the last.

CHAPTER III

"Take hands, and part with laughter—
Touch lips, and part with tears."

—A. C. Swinburne.

AFTER that first dinner at Oddonino's they met every day while Vervain remained at the flat. She would not always dine with him, and she steadily adhered to her determination not to come to any expensive restaurant again, while he chafed in vain. It was absurd, he told her, since she had looked charming, and there was not a better dressed woman in the room. "A woman"—always a woman to his mind, and never a girl of twenty! Her little black gown was perfectly up-to-date, and her neck and arms were the whitest he had ever seen; yet perhaps it was the studied simplicity of her appearance that was not very young. She had dressed her hair low over her forehead at a time when all but French women wore it drawn back or else parted at the side, and there was something rather French about her, he thought—something that the French themselves would have called *chic* or *distinguée* if he could but have known. They had gone on from the restaurant to a variety show, and he had taken her back to the Mansions before the end of the programme that she might not be very late. It had been a success throughout, though he had not after all made such an advance as he intended. And yet she would not repeat the experiment.

Sometimes they went out to tea together, and sometimes she refused to leave the flat and he must needs stay there if he wanted to be with her. On Sundays they could lunch somewhere tête-à-tête, but on no other day; and there were occasions when she came home so late that he had been waiting for her, and seeing how fagged she was he would set about making tea or coffee for her instead of her doing it for him, and look after her the more jealously that she would have neglected herself. He very soon lost all thought of whether she would do him credit wherever he might take her, not only because he was so sure of her, but because her mere presence had become an unconscious necessity. Feeling had progressed rapidly enough with him; with her he could not assert that it had progressed at all, save for the greater intimacy between them. They had certainly grown very intimate. Seeing each other every day it was as if the situation developed without a hitch, as if one meeting flowed onward into another, and always at the further stage. Yet her manner to him had never really altered. She accepted him as he had presented himself to her—a man already bound, or on the verge of being engaged, which need not prevent their temporary friendship. She even referred frankly to his probable and speedy matrimony.

"When you are married you will understand women better," she said to him sagely. "I have noticed that married men always do. I suppose it is the necessary friction between husband and wife that creates the spark of intelligence."

It was her shrewd outlook on life that made him think

her older than she was; and he never noticed that she had always observed rather than experienced.

"Don't I understand you well enough?" he asked a trifle resentfully. "There is friction enough between us!"

"You understand as much of me as I wish," she said dryly. "And it is exactly the same with you. You are holding back two-thirds of yourself, and only showing me the remainder. We shall leave quite the wrong impression when we go out of each other's lives, but it does not really matter. We have had a top-hole time!"

He was not by any means ready to go out of her life as yet, and her unconcerned acceptance of it piqued him. Vervain was in charge of Mrs. Seymour's flat for three weeks after she met him in the rain, and throughout that time he never missed a day without waylaying her somewhere. Seeing her in the charming surroundings of a richer woman's home may have altered the impression he might have had if he had known her only at her own lodging; but there he could hardly have visited her, certainly not with the frequency he did at the flat. Even as it was she had some difficulty in keeping the friendship a separate thing in her life, apart from all that went before or would come after; but she had decided that it was the only way. Netta could not come to see her except in the evenings, since she left the advertising and addressing office where she was supervisor even later than her friend's nominal hours; and when she was coming Vervain contrived to meet Eger-ton first, or to go for a stroll with him after Netta had departed. During the first week of their acquaintance Oliver Bate had made things easy for them by being himself on leave and taking up his fiancée's time, and

he was an unconscious ally throughout since when he was with Netta the other two were free to meet. Beyond knowing that the man who had succoured Vervain in the rain had met her since, Netta was really ignorant of what was going on. Her own affairs were sufficiently engrossing to make her unobservant, and beyond a passing question, "Have you seen him lately?" the whole thing took a very secondary position in her mind. Vervain had few friends, none so intimate as Netta Pullman, and through those weeks in April she dropped all intercourse with them on the plea of being in charge of Mrs. Seymour's flat, and making the most of the novelty.

In May she would take her holiday, and in May Egerton would sail for South America. Their parting, therefore, would take place when she left the flat, and it was unlikely they would meet again, though there would be yet two weeks of his leave that he intended to spend in Gloucestershire, at his father's house.

"I am by no means looking forward to it!" he admitted to her. "And I am not sure that I shan't slip out of it after all, and only run down for a day or so to say good-bye."

"Yet I think you ought to go, Ted," she said thoughtfully, as they sat over the fire in the last week of her "caretaking." Egerton had grown very fond of Mrs. Seymour's drawing-room. He could not disassociate it from Vervain Chalmont, and he subconsciously regarded it as the outcome of her personality rather than the real owner's.

"Tell me why you think I ought to go," he said, laying his hand on hers and playing with the thin, restless fingers. She never drew her hand away if he took it,

but it became instantly quiescent and unresponsive, and her self-possession had so far kept him in check. "You are such a wise little woman!"

"Well, it is a mistake to be estranged from your own people, as long as they are decent. I know that from hard experience. I often wish I had relations, if only to refer to."

"I wouldn't mind either if they were only to be referred to!"

"Yes, but you must take a little trouble, and be prepared to put up with boredom. You are generally your own enemy, Ted!"

"How do you know that?"

"From lots of things you have told me. I shouldn't have let you flare out at your forestry inspectors over the labour question, if you had been my pal at the time."

"I was quite right."

"Yes, you were quite right, but that isn't the point. There was no need to tell them that you were quite right, because that proved them quite wrong! It's tactless. You could have proved it the same if you had waited, and let them buy their experience."

"And done irredeemable harm!" he broke out hotly. "I am responsible for my job, even though the government do put a lot of pig-headed mules into office to thwart me. They learned the truth for once, and had to climb down."

But Vervain shook her head. "And they pigeon-holed your name for future retaliation! It's no good, Ted, unless you are boss you've got to sit still and see those over you make fools of themselves. I see it every month with my committee. I could tell them exactly where

they waste money and time and make the League a dubious failure instead of a paying success. But it's not policy. I should only make enemies and lose my job."

The oldest and most sordid of her expressions had crept into her face to make it that of a cynical woman rather than a girl of twenty. And she did not see that his blunders were really a higher effort than her own diplomacy. The experience gained in fighting for a right to mere existence had not tended to elevate Vervain Chalmont. It had taught her to take advantage of other people's folly rather than oppose it honestly. In this their attitude to the work that lay before them the man was on a higher level than the woman, though he was, as she said, his own enemy.

Egerton recognised the help she meant to give him though he clung doggedly to his own method. She would have used her cleverness in a man's service did she belong to him, and tried to advise him to the best of her belief. Gain to her meant something material, the hard necessity of her life having forced her to consider self-preservation above all other considerations.

"I wonder that you have not married, Vervie," he said meditatively. "You would make a good little helpmate."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say "Well, I've plenty of time yet!" but she paused on the very words. It was more and more difficult to acknowledge her youth since he treated her as a mature woman, and she was growing almost ashamed of it and loth to resign the deference that he unconsciously paid her. "He would call me a child, and tell me I did not know what I was talking about, if he knew," she thought, on more than

one occasion when she had spoken with the crude belief of her years.

"I don't think I should care to be tied," she said in answer to his tentative remark. "Marriage is a thing one wants to try in one's leisure time, before one extends it into business hours. I sometimes think I should like a holiday husband!"

"A *what?*"

"A husband just while I am on my holiday—I have a holiday once a year, and it would be rather jolly to have someone to share it. We could be good pals and companions just for the time, you know, and then when one went back to work the thing would come to an end."

He began to laugh, a certain devil of amusement rising in his rather tragic eyes and spreading to his bearded lips. Vervain had grown so used to his beard that she no longer speculated as to how he would look without it, and whether the lower half of his face would betray some secret of his character to her. He looked round at her as she lay back in the easy chair beside him, her hands clasped behind her silken head, and his expression was subtly covetous. There was nothing markedly sensual or sexual about this thin girl with the sealskin hair and sorrowful eyes, and yet he was falling physically in love with her, and had been so more or less since their first meeting. She still half shocked the while she excited all his instincts, like a current of electricity. A holiday husband! What an idea for any woman to have! How dare she put such a thought into his head? And then he looked at her cool, colourless face and sweet set lips, and raged because she was obviously

thinking of nothing but the abstract possibility and never applying it to him.

Yet on her side the girl had had a half-acknowledged object in her provoking speech. Since he had so carefully informed her that he was not free she had with equal carefulness accepted him on his own terms, and with feminine subtlety had woven an atmosphere of aloofness and irresponsibility around herself. He should think her a free-lance rather than a husband-hunter. As their intimacy progressed she was aware that her interest in him might deepen into tenderness, and she faced the danger savagely. He should never know by one leaping pulse or betraying blush. She ruled her blood and held her breath if he touched her, producing the false calm that had chilled him into restraint. When he ventured to suggest marriage as a possibility for her, though with another man, she flung out her reckless repudiation of the permanent tie in the suggestion of the holiday husband. It was a speech made for effect, and had no least personal application. But with feminine inconsistency she had been wounded by his calmly assigning her as a wife to anyone else, and she was schooling her nerves not to betray her and did not look at him, or she might have seen danger ahead.

"You are going for your holiday fairly soon, are you not?" he said at last.

"In a week's time."

"So soon! You never told me?" He was obviously startled, and discomforted.

"Yes I did, weeks ago. Mrs. Seymour comes back on the thirtieth, and I go for my holiday on the third of May."

"Where will you go?" he asked in a low voice after a pause. He seemed suddenly depressed, and her own heart throbbed in answer. Their parting lay just one week ahead, and they might never see each other again. . . .

"I am going down to Folkestone, to a place where they take paying guests," she said rather rapidly.

"Folkestone!" he repeated with some distaste. "Why on earth do you go to that suburban sort of place?"

"It is not the season, so there will not be a crowd," she answered with unusual patience, for his lack of reason—almost of courtesy—would have drawn fire from her on ordinary occasions. But she knew that he hated Folkestone simply because she was going there out of his reach, and would have hated any place for the same reason.

"A seaside town out of the season is dull as well as cheap," he said inconsistently.

"Yes, it is cheap," she agreed with a little flash of humour. "Cheaper than it would be at another time of year, anyway. That is one reason for my going."

"Why don't you go to Wales, or the West Country? They are both more out of the beaten track."

"Too far. I have to consider the fare."

He pulled his moustache in silence. Then his hand slid down to his beard and pulled that also, making it still more pointed. She watched him half amused, half hurt, and wholly understanding. He was like a child threatened with the confiscation of a loved toy, and the suggested tragedy of his eyes had grown quite definite.

"Do you know anybody at Folkestone?" he said at

last, and glanced at her sharply as if suspicion had followed the words rather than prompted them.

"Not a soul. But I may find someone to talk to in the house where I am going."

"Is this friend of yours—Miss Pullman—going too?"

"No, she does not take her holiday till July. And she wants to go to her fiancé's people."

"Well, I did not realise that you were going so soon," he said sulkily. "This next week will be the end of us, then."

"The end of me—and this flat—yes," she admitted quietly.

"The end of me, too. I shall have to go down to Gloucestershire—I suppose."

"Yes."

"You are so sure that I ought to go! You don't know what those two weeks will be like." He waited a minute, and then the tragic eyes flashed into sudden storm. "I believe we shall both be fit to cut our throats—you in your blessed Folkestone, and I with my father's family."

"With boredom?"

"With boredom, of course!"

She knew that he looked at her with a mute question, and her hands closed rather quickly on the arms of her chair. "I am not going to be bored," she said, so much more bravely than he knew! "And I am going for my holiday. I want it—oh, how I want it!"

He rose abruptly and walked off to the further end of the room. He knew it in all aspects, and loved its irregular corners and the daintiness of its faint wall colours and the white paint that was so beautifully kept. But often as he had appreciated Mrs. Seymour's

taste he saw none of it now. The room was only a frame for Vervain Chalmont after all, and she seemed almost out of reach already.

"Curse the whole thing!" he said, below his breath, but audibly; and left the vague malediction to rest on his father's house, the township of Folkestone, and next week's parting—perhaps even the intimacy that had begun so casually in the rain.

Vervain rose leisurely also, and stood looking down into the fire. It was so warm an evening that they might have done without it, but that it added the last harmony of comfort and cosiness to the pretty room. The windows were open, and a faint smell of lilac or narcissus seemed to have floated up from an unlooked-for garden. She rested one hand on the white mantelshelf, and the sealskin head drooped a little. There was something infinitely lonely in the girl's shadowy figure despite the charm of the home-like room, something suddenly alien that did not belong to it. Outside the windows the sky was rapidly darkening to a night of windy stars; inside the firelight was the only illumination.

Egerton turned at the further end of the room and looked back. He never saw that room in his memory again without a pang—not for its firelit prettiness, but for that intensely lonely figure standing by the hearth. If she had been in the midst of desert sands she could not have struck a more isolated note. He came back to her, threading his way through scattered pieces of furniture that seemed to impede his progress, his impatience growing with each hindered step, and as he reached her he took her in his arms without a word. For a minute they stood close, in the silence of consent, and then he

put his hand under her chin and lifted her face to his own.

"For you are not going to tell me that you don't love me?" he murmured.

She gave vent to the echo of that sighing laugh, dying almost as soon as it was born. "The first time I saw you I wondered what it would be like to kiss you!" she confessed, and the long-delayed blood swept over her pale face from brow to chin. "I had never kissed a man with a beard."

"You might have had the experience any time these three weeks!" he said, and held her lips against his until she tried to push him away, breathlessly. There was no doubt that he was in physical earnest, whatever his mental attitude might be. "Why did you hold me off all this time?" he asked almost fiercely.

She hesitated. "I was afraid it would all come to an end if you once began to make love to me," she said untruthfully. What she had really feared was that he would read her own inclination and remember that he was bound to another woman. But he seemed to have cast that prudence to the winds, and she was glad for the moment's madness.

"It won't come to an end," he said between his kisses. "It has only just begun."

"It must end, anyway, when I go to Folkestone and you to Gloucestershire," she said, leaning away from him as if his passion overweighted her a little. "I suppose it does not matter till then."

"You are not going to Folkestone, nor am I going to Gloucester."

"Do you want me to stay in London?"

"No—we are going down West, to a little nondescript village that I know of, where it will be a real holiday for you!"

"We!—are you coming too?"

He looked down into her questioning eyes and answered them with his own. His words were nothing so plain. "Yes, I am coming too."

"For the whole fortnight?"

"For the whole fortnight."

"But your people—"

"That must go. I shall only have time to say good-bye to them as I said, and to get on board—afterwards."

"I don't—understand."

The words came very slowly from lips that seemed a little paler than usual, but her eyes still looked up into his with a strained attention not far short of anguish.

He drew her face against his own bearded one, and the novel contact distracted her for a minute so that his whisper in her ear hardly reached her understanding. But as he kissed her once more she knew what he had said.

"I want to be your Holiday Husband, Vervain!"

CHAPTER IV

"The chain
Your own hands forged about your fate
Who could not wait."

—Anon.

IT required thinking over, and she thought of it at intervals all night.

It is a strange thing that in youth, when there are many years ahead, we are always most impatient of missing opportunity. They seem slipping away so fast, and the chance of happiness going with them, that we snatch at anything that comes, with feverish hands. Only a few years later Vervain realised that had she been older she would have known that this was the beginning rather than the end of love in her life, and have hesitated from choice if not from morality. Even had her boast been true, had she wished for a "Holiday Husband" rather than the humdrum of married life, there were many such experiences to offer in the future, and Ted Egerton was not the only man who would suggest an illicit connection; but she had not this motive for precipitancy, since she was no profligate by nature. A woman very little older would have recognised that she jeopardised her chance of marriage and a secure future by such a plunge into temporary matrimony, even if she were not risking a greater love that might dawn for her later on.

But at the moment it looked to her as if this were the one chance in a lifetime, and that nothing greater could follow. She was a little in love, chiefly from the unusual intercourse with a different type of man to any she had ever seen; and she was a good deal curious—that snare of every daughter of Eve since the Garden of Eden. It did not look such a dreadful or final thing to do as it would have done to a more sheltered girl—even to Netta, who had been brought up in too guarded a home atmosphere for the independence thrust upon her later, and who had hardly got over her training that it was wrong to be outside a house by herself after dark. All Vervain's experience of home life had been gained in Netta's own household, and she had found it irksome, alternating with spells of liberty such as young men take as a matter of course. That she had not used her liberty after the fashion of a young man so far was due to the innate refinement already referred to, and the limitations of her wage-earning power. But had she chosen before this to live with any man as his wife she would not have thought it wrong so much as imprudent. The gist of the matter was that it had not been worth while, and now suddenly it seemed very much worth while.

It was that question of prudence that alone held her back. Ted would not marry her, whether she took him as her "Holiday Husband" or no. He had made that patent when he told her of the engagement in which she still believed; and if she refused the proposal of going away with him they must part in a week's time, with no definite hope of meeting again for years. On the other hand if she consented there was a fortnight's companionship on a closer basis than had gone before,

fourteen days during which they would at least live in and for each other. It was not much in a young life that had only gone through twenty years, but it was here to her hand, a positive happiness to grasp, while before and behind stretched the ordinary years, that had held nothing like this and it seemed impossible could ever hold anything like it again.

If she were found out!—that was the one deterring thought. It would mean dismissal from the League, and that meant the loss of a roof over her head, food to put in her mouth, clothes to cover her body. When you have no one to depend upon but yourself, your actions and their consequences assume an importance that is incomprehensible to those who have homes, and a second authority to which to defer. At intervals through that first restless night she woke and calculated the chances for and against such a disaster as discovery overtaking her. It was in her favour that she knew few people, and those very casually. She was a grain of sand in the multitude of humanity, and her existence was of infinitesimal importance even to the ladies of the League who thought that they took a great interest in her. Mrs. Seymour perhaps might be feared; but her enquiries as to how the holiday was spent were possible to parry. The chief drawback was that she must admit one other person to her confidence when she left London, in order to have her letters forwarded, for she must remain in touch with her employers in case of something urgent that must reach her, and it was obvious that she could not be communicated with by her maiden name. Netta Pullman was the only reliable agent that could be chosen to receive and forward letters, and Vervain reluctantly

admitted that Netta must be told—something. Perhaps it was not necessary to tell her everything. It was a risk, take it how one might; the question was, was it a risk worth taking?

"If I say yes I may be sorry all my life," she said to herself. "And if I say no I may be more sorry."

It was then that her decision was really taken.

There was no need to write and compromise herself to Egerton, for she knew that she would see him some time the next day. It chanced to be a busy day at the office, and she had to go to Waterloo after her work was supposed to be finished, to meet a lady from South Africa and act as convoy to a small hotel on the Embankment. She did not get home until long past seven, and found a slip of paper in the letter box telling her that Egerton had called and would return about nine o'clock. She made a hasty meal, fed the cats, and had changed her gown and rested before he arrived.

"There is no fire in the drawing-room to-night," she said as she let him in. "I was so late that I fed in the kitchen. Will you come in there?"

"It will remind me of our first meeting," he said, putting down his hat and stick and following her in. They never sat in the dining-room, though she had shown it to him, as it was one of the rooms that Vervain had preferred to keep shrouded in dust sheets until the owner's return.

"I thought you would not mind. I have made some coffee and kept it hot for you." Her manner was as it had been any time since they knew each other, but he put his arm round her as if proud of his new right, and looked down critically into her face. It was drawn

and tired, with shadows that accentuated the size of her eyes, and he thought that she looked quite twenty-seven.

"Had a hard day, sweetheart?" he said kindly.

"Very. I had to meet one of our stray lambs at Waterloo and pilot her to the Embankment Hotel. She asked me if Cleopatra's Needle were the Monument!" A momentary smile lit up her tired eyes and died down again like the flame of a candle. "Oh, how glad I am that after this week I shan't have to trot them round, for a time at any rate."

He pressed her head back against his shoulder, his hand across the aching brows. "Have you thought of what I asked you last night?" he said, and he spoke very tenderly. In her weariness his arms seemed a haven of refuge, and she was glad that she had decided not to oppose him. Only, her tone was a little grave, as befitted such a decision.

"Yes, I have thought. But I should have to tell Netta—perhaps you think that makes it impossible?"

She did not realise that in his present mood he would have brushed more glaring obstacles aside.

"Nothing makes it impossible," he declared, and his clasp tightened rather than the reverse. "If you had said no, I should still have said yes!—But why need we confide in Netta?"

"Because of my letters. I must have them forwarded, in case there were anything from the office."

"I see." He realised the importance to her, as to any other clerk in a position of some responsibility.

"Well, you need not tell Netta everything. Can't you say you are going for your holiday under a married

name, and posing as a widow? You need not say anything about me."

"I think it would be better to tell her to forward my letters to Mrs. Smith or Mrs. Jones or whatever you like to call me, and not to say anything else at all."

"Supposing she refuses?"

Vervain raised her head from his shoulder and stared at him.

"Why should she?"

"Oh well—she might not want to mix herself up in it—and she might think it her job to dissuade you!"

"Is that how a man would act?" asked Vervain curiously. "It seems funny to me. Women don't interfere with each other much, I suppose. At least I know that Netta will do what I ask and won't meddle."

She did not know that it was the ruling force of her own will that would compass her own ends. She honestly thought that Netta Pullman would have done the same for any "pal" of hers, and attempted no protest. Probably she would herself have done it for Netta, having a strong opinion of the liberty of the subject—even to the extent of juggling with one's own fate. But Netta would never have asked the same favour with downright directness. She would have asked advice instead.

There were a good many details to arrange, but they could be fitted in during the week before Vervain took her holiday—the train they should travel by, the place of meeting, whether they should arrive at the station together or not. On one point she was firm. She left the flat on the thirtieth of April, and would not allow him to come to her lodging where she must live after

that date. He might meet her outside, after business hours, anywhere he liked in reason, but she would not ask him to the combined room both on account of her landlady and herself.

"I can't afford to get a name for having men in," she said. "And I don't want Netta to see you. But I'll come out."

He had to be content with that, though he grumbled at her being more cut off from him than she had been at the flat. "I shall count the hours till we get down to Widgery," he said. "And then I can have you all to myself."

"Where is Widgery?"

"In the West Country. It's a long journey, I'm afraid. We change at Exeter, and get into a devil of a slow train that drags us out across the moors. But you'll like the place when we get there."

"What is it like?"

"A regular Devon comb, I hear—I've never been there myself. A man I know went there to fish last summer and raved about it. He gave me the address of the rooms he had, but I never thought I should use it. It comes in conveniently now, and I can take his name as a reference."

"Are you going to fish?"

"I shall take a rod and some tackle, and we will angle for moorland trout."

Vervain thought for a minute. "I wonder what clothes I shall want!" she said, with some doubt of her own wardrobe.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake don't go getting a trousseau! Remember that we've been married for years," he said,

and laughed a little, pulling her small cold ear with a sense of proprietorship.

"I wasn't going to be so extravagant," she said resentfully. "Only, I must have a few decent things—and the right *kind* of clothes."

He hesitated, glanced down at her, and met the flash of her eyes. "Don't dare!" she said under her breath.

"I don't, just now!" he said laughing. "But I shall buy anything I like—for my little wife!"

She coloured painfully, but consoled herself with the feminine knowledge that there could be little to buy in a moorland village, and she would take very good care never to go to the nearest town. Her pride was up in arms at the suggestion of accepting money from him save for the holiday itself; yet that night, after he was gone, she looked through her possessions with some anxiety and an inward calculation as to how much she had to spend. There was that pound put by for travelling expenses—she need not keep that, at any rate. If the weather were only fine she could go about in a sport's coat and short skirt, and summer shirts or blouses. It was always cheaper to dress in summer than in winter. She had the sport's coat—a cherry-coloured thing that Mrs. Seymour had given her as not suiting herself—but the skirt must be bought. She thought she could get one for half a sovereign anyhow, in those easy pre-war days. Her office coat and skirt would do for colder days and wet weather, and she must take the familiar rain-coat though she hated the sight of it. The little black evening gown was out of the question in a moorland village, but she had a pretty frock she had worn last summer that would do for the evening. It had cleaned very well, and

looked almost new. Her blouses were not so satisfactory—she so seldom bought one new for herself. The Committee ladies had been very kind to her in giving her things—not by any means worn, but not exactly what she would have chosen. It seemed to her that her clothes were always more or less adapted, and she longed to use her own taste and discretion for once. But she had been very grateful for the Committee ladies' gifts, though she always felt that she was depriving somebody's maid of her rightful dues!

"I should like a new hat, but I suppose it's impossible," she thought discontentedly, eyeing the rough straw she had pulled out of its hat-box. "I wish I had thrown it away last year—then I *couldn't* wear it. Perhaps if I look through Netta's things I shall find something that I like, and she will swop with me. Other people's clothes are a change, anyway."

She had not realised how near her decision was to its fulfilment until she got back to her combined room and Netta's vicinity. In two more days she would say good-bye to the office; on the third she took her plunge into the unknown. Though the two girls resumed their usual intercourse as neighbours, Vervain said nothing to her friend about her change of plans till the last moment, and Netta believed she was going to Folkestone. She felt sure of Netta, but the longer she put off telling her anything the less fear there was of questions. She had met Egerton after leaving the office on her last day there, and they had gone to a remote jeweller in the Edgware Road to buy a wedding ring, which was now in Vervain's purse waiting for to-morrow. She was not sentimental enough to hang it on a ribbon round her

neck. The expedition had taken time, and she did not go down to her friend's room until after supper.

Netta had promised to be in, and she opened the door almost as Vervain knocked. The place was strewn with things that might have been put in the wardrobe or hung behind the curtain, for Netta was an untidy girl; it looked uncomfortable to Vervain after the size and luxury of Mrs. Seymour's flat. She felt she hated this living in combined rooms, though she had made her own much more cosy and shipshape.

"So you are really off to-morrow?" said Netta, as Vervain displaced a writing-case bursting with correspondence in order to sit down, and lifted a pair of stockings off the chair back. "I'm in an awful mess—so sorry, Vervie."

"Don't apologise—I see you haven't had time to clear supper."

"I was too tired. I sat down to darn those stockings, and felt I just couldn't."

"Poor dear! Give me a needle—I'll do it."

Netta clasped her hands behind her head and leaned back luxuriously while Vervain drew the reading lamp nearer to see her work. Netta was a big girl, and fresh-coloured by nature, though London work had toned her down to a paler edition of the original plan. She looked capable, and indeed was so, but there was half the originality and force in her that there was in the small oval face bent over the stockings.

"I came to ask a favour of you," said Vervain quietly as she worked. "I want you to forward my letters for me."

"Of course I will. Old Shanks isn't too reliable, is

she?" Mrs. Shanks was the landlady of the tall house in Tachbrook Street.

"Oh, but I want you to forward any letters from the office as well. I've told the League to send them here."

Netta nodded. She was not particularly surprised. Vervain might not find herself comfortable as a "paying guest" at Folkestone, and might move before the end of the fortnight.

"Who's taking on your job?" she asked casually.

"Oh, they are sharing it out together. The Hon. Sec. will be there herself one day, and the Inspecting Member the next, and so on. A pretty mess there will be on my return!"

"Well, you've got a fortnight off, anyway," said Netta consolingly. "I wish I were coming too. You are going to have glorious weather—the sky was as red as an apple to-night." She reached out lazily for the writing-case, and opened it. "Here, I'd better write down the address," she said.

There was a pause.

"Mrs. Egerton——" said Vervain deliberately.

"Care of Mrs. Egerton?"

"No—Mrs. Egerton. Don't put my name."

Netta's pleasant hazel eyes were first puzzled, then troubled.

"I say, Vervain!" she said at last.

"Yes. I'm going under that name," said the hard young voice in response. "It's only for the fortnight."

"Alone?"

"No!"

There was another pause. Vervain finished one stock-

ing and took up the other. "It's an experiment," she said.

Netta drew a long breath. She had known Vervain since she was eight years old, and she knew that it was hopeless to argue. You could not manage Vervie that way.

"Of course I'll do anything you want," she said slowly and rather wistfully. "Letters or anything else. But I wish you'd tell me a little more."

"I will—when I come back," said Vervain. "It will be all over by then. It's not going to last more than the fortnight."

"Then this Egerton——"

"He's my 'Holiday Husband'—that's all." She flung the finished stocking onto the bed, almost as if she flung the man away too. "The address is Foliot Cottage, Widgery, Dartmoor," she said. "Good-night, Netta—You're a sport."

"No, *you* are!" said Netta.

CHAPTER V

"Ere the telltale moon had risen,
This a bird of night did sing,
'Lock thy heart like any prison
Till thou hast a ring!'"

English version of Gounod's Opera, "Faust."

VERVAIN was half afraid that Netta would come to her room the next morning to say good-bye, or perhaps to reopen the subject of her holiday which she had practically closed the night before. The mere thought made her impatient, and she wanted to brush away interruptions or hindrances, and start on her Adventure now that she had made up her mind to do so. She wished it were already begun, though she had no fear of being really prevented. Nothing but the necessity to struggle for existence had ever prevented her carrying out a purpose yet in her young life, and she did not recognise any dissuasion except the hard fact of circumstances. "If you can't do a thing, why, you can't!" said Vervain. "But if it's only a question of your own decision, of course you can." She was not accustomed to having other people decide for her. It was one of the novelties of a "Holiday Husband," that she would be obliged to defer to him, and that had been an attraction.

Netta did indeed come and knock at the door, but did not ask to come in. It was half past eight, and she was just off to the city, while Vervain still lay in her

bed enjoying the luxury of knowing that she need not be at the office at half past nine.

"Good-bye, Vervain!" said Netta's voice through the door. It sounded a little uncertain, a little less cheery than usual. "I thought I'd just come up and wish you—luck."

"Thanks," Vervain called back, but without moving. "Just off?"

"Yes. You're not up yet, I suppose?"

"No—thank Heaven!"

"Had breakfast?"

"Yes, I got that—I was hungry. Had it in bed!"

"Jolly nice, isn't it? Well, good-bye!"

"Good-bye!"

Netta's feet sounded all down the narrow stairs, and lost themselves in the gulf of the house. They seemed to carry something else away besides their owner—some former stage of girlhood belonging to the girl still lying in bed. There was a dividing line between this day and the next, visible even to those speculative, dreamy eyes. Vervain pushed back her dark soft hair and sighed, not so much with regret as with relief. Life might be tragic or distasteful to-morrow, but it would not, could not, be dull. The routine of ordinary life seemed to slip from her like a discarded garment even as she rose from bed, washed and dressed, and proceeded to tidy her room. She must leave everything in order, for she was to return here—some day. But the return looked distant across the haze of an illimitable fortnight crammed with strange new happenings, and she locked up everything she valued mechanically, and drew down the blind

as if someone lay there dead without realising the significance of her action.

She had packed her small trunk and hat-box the evening before, and all that remained to do was to ask the woman who came in to clean the tall house, to help her carry the boxes downstairs. Vervain found her scrubbing on a lower floor, and obtained her assistance, turning the key in her own door with a sense of having crossed the rubicon already. She whistled for a taxi herself, and the driver obligingly got down and lifted her boxes from off the doorstep on to his cab. Then she told him to drive to Paddington Station, and rolled away from the narrow house in the unlovely street off the Vauxhall Bridge Road.

It was a vapoury morning, with a promise of heat later. Netta's prophecy was coming true—there would be warm weather. Vervain was wearing the coat and skirt she always wore at the office, as suited to a journey, but she had a new hat of burnt straw which partly consoled her. If she had had to start in the very clothes she had been wearing for the past months, she felt as if half her excitement would have been damped down—and it needed excitement to stimulate her to her purpose. Yes, she acknowledged that. In the cab she took off her left glove and put on the wedding ring and the gold keeper they had chosen. The latter was a second-hand ring and partly covered the excessive newness of the plain gold band. Egerton had advised it for that reason. Then she put her glove on again and stared out of the window at the parks, just breaking into full leaf, and wondered why she did not feel frightened or shocked or anything but a little disillusioned already. There

was no real Adventure after all in this deliberate going away with a man to whom she was not legally tied, since there was no uncertainty about it. The spice of life lay in what might chance, and she felt she knew every stage of the journey beforehand. The only danger lay in the possibility of being found out, and that was merely unpleasant, with serious consequences to herself. She hardly thought of it as humiliating, and she experienced no pang of fear lest she should become a mother. There was no necessity for women who did what she was doing to give birth to more undesired humanity, and many legitimate marriages did not end in childbirth. Vervain was quite positive that she would not become a mother; Egerton had promised her that she should not be. Again, had she been older she could not have been so egotistically secure; but her ignorance saved her from a good deal of misgiving.

As the cab drew up at the departure side of Paddington Station, Egerton came forward to open the door and to help her out. He was dressed in grey tweed—a Spring suit—and wore a travelling cap to match. She looked at him with surprise, and almost faltered. She had never seen him in anything but dark clothes in London, the correct ugliness of afternoon attire, and he looked a different man, and younger. There was something happy, almost triumphant, in his very atmosphere too, that seemed outside her calculations. He was so evidently going on holiday! It made her feel a little conspicuous to be with him.

“I’ve taken the tickets and got the seats. The porter will label your luggage, dear,” he said, and his hand closed over hers with a grip of possession under cover

of helping her from the cab. "What's your fare, chauffeur?"

"Half-a-crown, sir—thanks!" said the man, pleased with his tip, and swung the two boxes to the porter.

"I'm so sorry, Ted, but I had no time to label the luggage—I got off in such a scramble," said the girl composedly. They had agreed on this beforehand, to save the risk of labelling the boxes "Mrs. Egerton," at Tachbrook Street. "But I brought the labels with me. Will you tie them on, please?"

"Yes, all right—label them for Lady's Folly, porter, and see them into the van, will you! Come along, Vervain, we can take our seats at once."

She followed him on to the departure platform with a strange feeling of helplessness in being looked after instead of looking after herself. If she had been going to Folkestone as she had intended she would have taken her own third class ticket, seen her luggage labelled by an indifferent porter who did not expect much of a tip, found her own carriage, and having given the man fourpence settled herself and her belongings amongst other economical people. To have all this done for her, and to travel first class, was a new experience. Once or twice, it is true, she had been "seen off," at a railway station by a man who was sufficiently attracted to pay her the attention. But his means had always been sufficiently limited to forbid her letting him pay her fare, or to do more than accept a paper to read on the journey or a box of refreshment-room chocolate. The only occasions on which she had travelled first class were when the third were so crowded that the guard used his authority to put her in with more monied passengers, no

doubt selecting her as a recipient for the concession on account of a certain air of breeding about her, despite her shabby clothes or tired face.

Egerton had taken corner seats in a smoking compartment. "I knew you wouldn't mind, and you can have your cigarette," he said. "It's a long journey."

"I prefer it, of course," she answered, and took the seat with her back to the engine in preference to having the wind in her face. He put her umbrella and raincoat in the rack for her, tucked a light rug over her knees, and dropped a box of Charbonnel's chocolates into her lap.

"I got you the Windsor and Punch," he said. "Like any other papers?"

She gasped a little. A painful habit of calculation made her recognise that he was spending as much over the journey itself as would have paid for her whole holiday—at Folkestone. She saw that his own selection of literature was the Times and Country Life, and with instinctive frugality thought that they could exchange when they had read their own papers.

"No, that will do nicely," she said. "I shall probably go to sleep after lunch! Do we have it on the train?" She had seen the restaurant car, or she would have suggested sandwiches.

"Yes, of course. Would you like the first or second luncheon?"

"The first—if you don't mind. I am rather hungry!"

"Already?" He laughed down at her with something in his smiling eyes that made her heart beat a little thickly. No one had even been quite so possessive over her—quite so pervading. It seemed to envelope her per-

sonality and was a little stifling. "I prefer the first lunch myself," he said. "The car smells of other people's luncheons when you go later. And if you want to sleep like a gorged little boa-constrictor I will tuck you up on the seat."

"Do you always take care of people like that?" she said a little wistfully, below her breath.

"I am going to take care of you!" he whispered back, and then had to go to the platform end of the carriage to tip the porter and hear which end of the train the luggage was in.

Two other passengers appropriated the other corner seats of the carriage before they started, but it did not fill as a third class would have done. They were both men, and looked a little dubiously at the slim figure in the well-worn blue serge and the burnt straw hat. Ver-vain had opened her magazine, and was looking through it while she luxuriously munched chocolates. She did not see her fellow-passengers' uncertainty with regard to their cigars, but Egerton came to the rescue with a little smile. "My wife does not mind smoke!" she heard him say, and controlled her startled senses to look up and add "No, I like it!"

"Thanks very much," said the older of the two men with a friendly smile. "Only, seeing a lady in the carriage one does not quite like to take it for granted." He had a delightful manner, and a fine, rather florid face. A handsome man, of a type of which the little working secretary knew nothing. The women of the leisure classes she had seen on the Committee of the Women's Colonial League; but the men who met them

off Committee, in their private lives, she had never encountered.

"I want to smoke my own cigarette!" she said, lifting her clear sad eyes to the speaker's face, and smiling with her lips because she had liked his voice and manner. He looked at her with interest, and wondered what the story was behind that unusual face. Her husband seemed an ordinary, pleasant fellow enough, save that he wore a beard which was unfashionable, and the basket in the rack over his head suggested the object of his journey.

"Going fishing?" he asked with a little smile.

"Yes, I hope so," said Egerton, readily. "I've been recommended to try the Dartmoor streams. We are going off for a week or so."

"Ah! I hope you'll have good sport. I know Two Bridges and that part. Ever fished there?"

"No." The two men drew instinctively nearer together and plunged into a discussion on rods and bait and the vagaries of moorland trout. Vervain heard mysterious technicalities as an uneasy accompaniment to her perusal of the Windsor—"Nothing, over a quarter of a lb.—Try a Blue Upright, or a Half Stone—though it's early for a Half Stone as yet"—and half wished that they had not started the journey with this chance discussion, though it made their position as married people of some years' standing more realistic. She was aware that Ted was referring to her as "my wife" with easy frequency in a way that jarred on her ears each time she caught the words. She hoped he would not overdo it. Did men always drag in their feminine belongings at each turn to the conversation? She drew a breath of positive relief when the warning came to

"Take you. seats for the first lunch!" and Ted took the rug from her and opened the door for her exit. The other occupants of the carriage took the second lunch, so they would be rid of them for some time. It was the younger man of the two who made her uneasy. He did not talk so much as his companion, and he looked more at her and less at Egerton. She looked at Ted herself a little critically, as they left the carriage, and spoke dryly over her shoulder.

"I thought we agreed to wear old clothes on this trip?"

"Oh, this suit isn't new!" he said hastily. "I wore it on board coming home."

She shrugged her shoulders. The day was unusually warm for the first of May, and her own clothes felt dark and heavy, or perhaps dissatisfied her in comparison with his. In the restaurant car she took off her coat, conscious that her blouse at least was fresh and dainty. It had, in fact, been given to her by Mrs. St. Ledger, the Inspecting Member of Committee, and was of a more expensive quality than Vervain could have bought, though not exactly what she would have chosen—a trifle too elaborate and mature for her real age.

"Never mind, it looks married!" she thought half comically as she glanced down the menu.

"What will you drink?" Ted asked, watching her take off her gloves. She knew that he was looking for the wedding ring and that it gave him some mysterious pleasure and pride that she could not understand. Was the sense of proprietorship so much to a man? It seemed so young to her—almost childish.

"I should like coffee," she said, and kept her eyes

lowered with intention. ("He is giving it away!" she thought impatiently. "How can he be so careless!")

"Won't you have some wine?"

"No, thanks. I should really go to sleep, in this heat, at the table!"

He laughed, and ordered beer for himself with the covetousness of a man usually denied it. In British Moldavia, she remembered, men did not drink beer unless they courted disaster. Then they commented to each other, confidentially, on the other people lunching round them, and looked out of the window at the smiling country flying past in the Spring sunshine.

"Those are nice chaps in the carriage with us," said Egerton. "Sportsmen, both of them."

"Do they belong to the part of the country where we are going?" she asked with some misgiving.

"No, they are leaving the train at Bristol. But they know the Moor. They say the fishing is quite good, of its kind, though you rarely get anything over a quarter of a lb. You will have to learn to handle a rod, Vervie."

"I am much more likely to carry the basket!" she retorted.

"I shan't let you carry anything," he said quickly, and again that blank feeling of having lost her independence overwhelmed her.

As they made their way back to their own carriage they had to pass through one of the luggage vans. It was empty save for a few boxes and crates, and at the moment none of the other passengers were with them. Egerton seized the girl in his arms, kissing her quickly, while she stood absolutely quiescent in her surprise for she thought at first it was the swaying of the train that

had prompted him to take hold of her. When she discovered his purpose her chief feeling was a fear of discovery, forgetting that the ring on her finger might be supposed to give him a legalised right to such demonstrations.

"Be good to me, Vervie!" he said, and his voice sounded to her unduly loud and strained through the rush of the train. That phrase again! Why should he adjure her to be good to him, when it seemed that all the executive of the situation was in his hands? She felt bewildered, and answered absolutely nothing save for a remorseful return of his kisses because she felt that she ought to understand better than she did.

After Bristol they had the carriage to themselves, but the frequent intrusion of guards and inspectors of tickets prevented a repetition of any love-making between them, to her inward relief. She disliked the precariousness of kisses snatched with one eye on the window, and she had a sense of the ludicrous that would have spoiled the zest of caresses. It had been a different thing in the flat, as long as she was there, and she hardly took into consideration that for the last few days he had had to satisfy himself with hurried embraces in cabs or on the doorstep of her lodging if he saw her home after dark. She had hardly accorded him the liberty of touching her before she was barricaded again by circumstances, and his natural male instincts were seeking an outlet.

They arrived at Exeter after three, and had time for tea before catching the local train that would take them on to the Moor. Vervain was growing tired with the journey, and wished that it would come to an end. They ran through endless acres of sunlit moor, where the

young grass and heather seemed only just breaking the threatening grimness of its dark desert, and here and there was a glimpse of roofs in a valley when they stopped at stranded stations, each one seeming further off from civilisation.

"I believe you are taking me to the outer edge of the world!" she said. "Will it never end? I did not know there was anything so remote in England!"

"Here we are!" he answered reassuringly as the train came to a settled and definite standstill in what was evidently the terminus of the line. Vervain could see an ugly village, or small town, with a group of tall chimneys suggesting a factory of some sort, and rising abruptly above it another greenish-brown hill crowned with rocks; but the name on the station board was Lady's Folly.

"But this isn't Widgery!" she said.

"No, we have to drive three miles. I ordered a conveyance of some kind. Widgery lies on the other side of Folly Tor, down in the valley."

"Then it really will be the end of the world when we get there!" said the girl, the sense of isolation growing on her with this travelling beyond the railway. The evening air was sweet and keen as they came out into the road beyond the station, and a venerable fly stood awaiting them as if it had stood there since the last century.

"No car to be got hereabouts, I suppose?" said Egerton, as the porter put up their joint luggage.

"Well sir, there be a car in the town, but it be gone tu Moreton Hampstead tu-day."

"We are lucky to get the fly then," said Egerton, as

he helped Vervain in. Nothing seemed to upset his equanimity to-day, but she was curiously disheartened.

"We were lucky to get any conveyance at the end of nowhere!" she said, as they drove through the streets of the little town and out into open country beyond. It was an ugly town, and obviously built during the last fifty years through some reason connected with the factory; but there were a few shops, and the girl hastily decided that she would not give him the chance to spend money on her there even if there proved little to buy. She was rather silent as they drove out over the lower slope of the hill called Folly Tor and down into the valley land beyond; but a subtle content was stealing over her senses. The fine, rare air made her a little sleepy, and the restlessness and sense of uncomfortable change that had been upon her all day seemed to have been left behind with the palpitating train. Here there was nothing but an immense space of earth and sky, and she felt insignificant before it and quiescently helpless. After all, she had put her fate into the hands of this man beside her for two weeks, and it was his to take all decision and all trouble from her overweighted shoulders—why struggle against the pleasant lassitude of dependence? If this were the essence of married life it was at least a rest. She dropped her little, thin hand into his that mutely sought it, and felt the warmth and protection of his clasp.

It was five o'clock before they drove over a narrow bridge into Widgery. The village seemed to consist of an old stone church with a squat tower and round it a group of small houses and cottages, one of which was an inn, another a forge, a third a general shop, and the

rest regular moorland dwelling places of the same grey stone as the church. Up behind it all stretched a great green slope ending in a broken rock against the sky, and so steep that it looked like a wall rising over the cottages. This was Widgery Tor, and the trout stream came tumbling into Widgery between it and its neighbour, Folly. The noise of the little river was audible in every house, and without the Foliot Widgery would never have existed, for it was but a handful of cottage homes gathered on the slope above the river.

The fly drove through a group of stunted oaks into the one street of the village, and stopped at the furthest end before a cottage standing in its own little garden. There was a dripstone porch, and in the entry a grey-haired woman stood with her hand over her eyes to see the visitors, for the cottage faced due west and the light was shining straight in on her.

"Good evening, sir—good evening, Mrs. Edgerton, mum!" she said with a homely welcome. "Come right in, you must be tired, for 'tis turned away warm! A proper fine May day, though."

Vervain walked straight through the porch and into the little parlour, leaving Egerton to settle with the cab. Thank Heaven, she had no such duties for this fortnight! It was a low room with heavy beams bolted into the ceiling with wooden pins, and deep window seats, but much larger than she expected from the outside. There were very clean frilled curtains at the open lattice, and the young green of the Spring world outside seemed to smile at her.

"The end of the world is very pleasant!" she said to herself whimsically, while she smiled at her landlady

—such a contrast to the grim personality in Tachbrook Street!—and explained that they had had tea at Exeter.

“You will just have time to get unpacked and rested, and then we’ll have supper,” said Egerton as he entered. “My wife is tired, Mrs. Pethick; it’s been a long journey.”

Vervain was getting resigned to his repetition of her relation to him. After all, it had been a fresh shock when Mrs. Pethick had called her Mrs. Egerton—she was rather glad he had not done so too. For a minute it crossed her mind to wonder cynically how this pleasant Devonshire woman’s manner would alter if she knew the truth—that Ted Egerton was only her “Holiday Husband” and the ring on her finger a decent lie! Then she found herself following this same woman up a little steep staircase, and being shown a mutual bedroom for Ted and herself, with a smaller room across the landing where he might dress and have his bath. There was no proper bath-room, of course, but two large and rather new hip-baths graced the two rooms. She divined that people had only recently come to fish during the Summer months, and that Mrs. Pethick had learned what was due to her lodgers. Well, there was no bath-room in the Tachbrook Street house either, though she had revelled in it at Mrs. Seymour’s flat.

Her hostess went downstairs, to assist in bringing up the luggage, and for the minute Vervain was alone. She walked over to the windows, open like those of the parlour, and leaning out breathed the perfumes of the May evening. There were gilly-flowers and forget-me-nots in the garden, and a great bush of flowering currant. It was the very essence of Spring, and youth, and leisure to be happy. Yet for one passionate moment her thought

was not of Egerton, but "If I had only found this place for myself!—If I had only come here alone!"—Her mind travelled back over the interminable journey—all across the road that cut her off even from the railway, then the long miles over the moor, and the hours that lay beyond that before one reached London; and it seemed that he had indeed severed her from her moorings and left her stranded in his arms. If he were only not here—but he was here.

She could hear the gurgle of the stream running down past the church and the queer bridge with the refuge built out in its centre for foot passengers, since it was not broad enough for more than one vehicle to cross. The sound of the water was in her ears as Egerton's voice spoke behind her, and she turned round to him with that new submission that seemed to belong to her stolen wifehood.

"So we're safely here at last, darling!" he said, and she saw that he had shut the door—shut her in with him, and the world outside. "And the holiday is really begun. . . . Be good to me, Vervie!"

CHAPTER VI

"The burden of sweet speeches. Nay, kneel down,
Cover thy head, and weep; for verily
These market-men that buy thy white and brown
In the last days shall take no thought for thee."

—*A. C. Swinburne.*

ARE you ready, Vervain? Have you got your hat on? I am going down to the post office to see if those flies have come, and to get the letters."

Egerton stood at the bottom of the staircase and called, and Vervain walked out of her bedroom and stood at the head of the stairs to answer him. The staircase ran straight up the centre of the cottage between the front rooms, and there was a rope on either hand in place of any banister. The back part of the building had evidently been added later, for the stairs arrived abruptly in the middle of a little square landing from which smaller rooms opened out in an irregular fashion as if they had been joined on or divided up as wanted. Mr. and Mrs. Egerton's room was in the older part of the cottage and looked out on the frontage, Ted's dressing-room being at the back; but it was on the little landing that Vervain was standing, with the morning sun behind her since the cottage faced west and east.

She had not yet got her hat on, and the light being behind her every delicate curl and tendril of her silken hair was distinct, and looked quite black but burned

into a lighter shade at the edges. It fell over her forehead almost to her brows, and the face beneath was sunburnt. No doubt a week's exposure to sun and air had given her a colour that she lacked in London, but it was not this that struck Egerton with an uneasy sense of wonder as he gazed up at her. She looked so *young*! The years seemed to have slipped from her in these seven days, leaving her face rounder and fuller and without the shrewd strained expression that he knew so well. The ease of the life, and the absence of immediate anxiety over mere existence, were having an effect that seemed almost miraculous. He stared at her while she laughed down at him, and it flitted through his brain that women ought not to have to work so hard for a living if it stole their attributes like this and made them old before they had been young. Was she as young as she looked? A momentary dismay possessed him, for he had the curious principles of many men which set a barrier round immaturity up to a certain age, and beyond that regard all womenkind as fair game.

"You look very fit!" he said abruptly, out of his thought.

"I'm all right," said Vervain carelessly. She knew that what he really meant was that she was looking very pretty, and her glass had told her that already. She had put on a loose, soft shirt that left her neck bare, and the short skirt and cherry-coloured sport's coat. It was holiday attire, and she felt utterly different to the hackneyed office girl in her old coat and skirt going to business every morning. There was beauty, and colour, and warmth in her now, gained by the right to live.

"I won't be a minute," she said, standing there with

a hand on either rope. "You go on for the letters, and I'll go straight to the Happy Valley. I know you won't rest until you get that 'Blue Upright' from Plymouth! If you don't catch me up on the way I shall find you down by the river."

There was no postman in Widgery. By immemorial custom the handful of villagers walked down to the post office about ten o'clock and claimed their letters, but as it was but a stone's throw it was quicker than waiting for a delivery. The mail came in from Lady's Folly about nine o'clock, being brought over by an old postman on a bicycle who took the outgoing bag back with him; but the post mistress liked plenty of time to sort the very limited pile of letters, and it was no use trying to hurry her. Egerton walked off down the village street with his creel slung over his shoulder, and a few minutes later Vervain came out of the cottage and crossed the churchyard, taking the short cut to the bridge. As she had said, if she were first he might overtake her on her way, and if he were ahead she would find him at the trout stream. It was characteristic of the West Country that it had taken him a week to make use of the information gathered from his fellow passengers, and obtain the mysterious flies known as "Blue Upright" and "Half Stone" from Plymouth. But he suspected that the local names represented better flies for moorland trout than any he had brought from London.

Vervain did not follow the course of the little river, which was exceedingly devious and would have taken her a mile out of her way before she reached the shallow pools beloved of the trout. She loitered over the bridge, a happy, sunny figure, and then walked uphill through

a farm, and down into some fields on the other side, and then scrambled through a gap in a hedge and came out in a sloping meadow as steep as Widgery Tor itself, that fell straight to the river bed. It was really a deep comb or chine, wooded on either slope, with cultivated lands above rising to the sky, and in the far distance the exquisite heather blues and purples of Folly Tor. Egerton and Vervain had named it for themselves the Happy Valley, but to the folk of Widgery it was generally known as Watercut or Watershed.

The climb up through the farm had been steep, and the sun was already hot. Vervain sat down for a minute on the steep side of the pasture, and clasped her hands round her knees, looking with eyes that loved it along the Happy Valley. It was full of young green larches, and oak and silver birch, and the birds called across from slope to slope in a torrent of song this May morning. Far below her she could hear the sound of running water—that most maddening of all musical sounds, suggesting words that are never translated to any known language. When she listened to the Foliot, whether in her own bedroom at the cottage, or in the open village street, or here on the slopes above it, Vervain always had the impression that some one was talking near her, and that if she could only understand she would overhear the riddle of existence. But the river kept its secret, and the atom of humanity sitting on the hot slope above it strained wistful ears in vain.

Egerton did not come. Either his letters had detained him, or there were no letters and he had gone on ahead and was somewhere down there by the river making a cast and hidden from her by the trees. Vervain was

meditating getting up from her seat in the sweet rich grass and sauntering down to the water, when she saw a man come through the gate at the bottom of the pasture, and look up towards her before he began to climb; so steep was the slope that he was literally under her feet, and a considerable way down, but the searching sunlight showed them plainly to each other. It was not Egerton, but it was some one she had seen several times before—a young man from the farm she had come through, possibly the farmer's son or a mere labourer. He wore soil-stained clothes, and his shirt was sufficiently open this hot morning to show his brown throat and breast with beads of moisture breaking on it as he made the stiff ascent to where the girl sat in the grass. He was indeed an ordinary son of the soil, with peasant features, and blue eyes that stared up boldly at the gay blot of colour made by the red sport's coat.

Some instinct of the *gamin* in Vervain had caused her to say good morning to this young man when she had passed him before on her way to the river, and once she had loitered to watch him at work mending a gate, and had asked him what he was doing. His answers had been that of an equal in tone, as he might have spoken to a village girl, and it had rather piqued her interest. She was so accustomed to the "Lady" of the London streets, and the "Miss" of domestic service, in accosting her, that the independence of country labour struck her as provocative. She looked up now with a smile of recognition in her eyes as the young fellow halted in front of her.

"Good morning!" she said. "A hot climb, isn't it?"

"It du make yu sweat!" said the young man amicably,

drawing his hand across his forehead. Under his cap his hair curled in damp rings, and his mere presence seemed to breathe warm, rich life.

"You've got a proper warm seat!" he said, looking down at the girl with ready familiarity.

Something in his eyes caught her attention, and the devil of adventure tempted her again.

"Sit down for a minute and have a rest," she said, amused at his free and easy equality, and as he dropped on the grass at her side she looked at him critically. Supposing she had been a village girl would this type of humanity have attracted her? She had witnessed several bucolic flirtations over cottage hedges and in the lanes during the past week, and had speculated over them to Egerton. "What do they talk about?" she had said, and he had shrugged his shoulders. "They don't talk," he said. "The girl giggles, and the man nudges her."

"Perhaps I ought to giggle!" thought Vervain, intensely amused at the situation, and really did begin to laugh through the mere exuberance of her youth.

She had not calculated the result, but it is likely that he took it for direct encouragement. "What be ye laughin' at?" he said, and touched her with his arm, thereby making her laugh more at the truth of Egerton's assertion. "The girl giggles, and the man nudges her!"

But it did not stop at nudging. He leaned closer to her suddenly, his arm on her knee, and his face thrust close to hers with an evident intention. The elementary impulse between man and maid did not wait for explanation or approaches, and was unforeseen by him as by her. But she scrambled to her feet with a little cry, realising

that she was alone, and out of earshot of rescue, with a mere male animal in the mating season. Now she knew why things happened in lonely country districts that got reported in the papers, and had always mystified her. She had thought that there must be some leading up to violence, some advancing and retiring. She saw that there was none. The thing might be upon one in the shock of an instant, after the old simile of fire and tow. There was no running up the steep, rough pasture, no escaping with a rush, for he was upon his feet also, an imminent menace in his lusty manhood. But she turned herself wildly to the green width of the field—and saw Egerton push through the gap in the hedge and hurl himself down upon them before the labourer's hands were off her.

There were few or no words—there did not seem time for words. Egerton uttered an oath, and struck out from the shoulder, but the other man parried the blow with a rough and ready method as effectual for the moment as science.

"Fight fur her then, marn, if she be yours!" he said, blowing like a young bull, with his hands up. He wore no coat, and Ted flung his own jacket and cap away with the readiness of the fighting sex. As by common consent both men moved down the slope where the ground was less steep to give them foothold, and closed with each other, while the woman stood still on the slope above them looking at them with fascinated eyes—exactly as a hen pheasant might stand and watch the battle between two cocks in the Spring. It seemed to leave her powerless to cry out, or to interfere in any way; and if the young labourer had come off victorious

she had a hypnotised feeling that he might order her to follow him and have his will of her without resistance on her part. . . .

After a few minutes she dropped to the grass and sat there with her face hidden in her hands. Civilisation swept back over her again, and it was a horrible sight—two men fighting in the shameless morning like any two cock pheasants, or young bulls, for possession of the female. She did not know how the fight went—did not want to know. After a long time, it seemed to her, some one touched her on the shoulder, and she looked up to see Ted by her side. His face was cut and bruised, and the blood had flowed freely staining his soft shirt and the light coloured tie that he was wearing. He had put on his jacket, but was holding his cap and the fishing tackle.

"I want to get down to the water," he said quietly, "to wash this mess off."

"Let me carry the basket!" she begged, in curiously subdued tones; but he shook his head, and they made their way in silence down the steep incline. The other man had disappeared.

When they reached the river he waded in and soaking his handkerchief washed the blood from his face. Then with a certain fastidiousness he asked her to fold the tie for him so as to hide the stains; he could button his Norfolk jacket going home, and the shirt would not show. It struck her that he would have looked infinitely worse if he had not had a beard, and that the other man was probably in such a case.

"Are you going to fish?" she asked with a vague feel-

ing of surprise, as he began to make up his cast with one of the new flies.

"Yes, of course," he said in his ordinary tones, as though nothing had happened. "I'm sorry you had such a fright, Vervie. I ought not to have let you come alone."

She hesitated, and then spoke with an effort, her face hot with shame.

"It was my fault, Ted—I have said good morning to him once or twice, and I advised him to sit down and rest for a moment—he looked so hot!"

But he was not in the mood to find her guilty, and took her part against herself. "Anybody might have shown the brute that civility. You couldn't expect to have to treat him like a wild beast! But you will know in future. The man wanted a lesson—and he got it!"

His sense of exultation was too innate to be destroyed by the subtleties of a bad conscience on her part. He looked at her with covert triumph, as the primeval woman won in fair fight by the primeval man. She could not understand that her value was enhanced in his mind by that ugly scene on the hillside, and that he was in the pride of possession. It seemed to her derogatory, and she was horribly ashamed of herself. As soon as he had made a cast she went a little further up stream, but not out of sight, and sat on a big mossy boulder with a humiliated feeling that she must remain where he could keep an eye upon her as one untrustworthy of liberty. The frothing water below the rock looked delicious, and seeing him absorbed in his angling she slipped off her shoes and stockings with caution and felt the cool water boil round her feet and ankles with

a delicious caress. When he caught sight of her some time after he laughed, and waded up stream to see what she was about.

"Had any sport?" she asked, surreptitiously pulling the short skirt over her knees, for she had tucked it up like a child to keep it dry from the spray of the troubled river.

"Yes, half a dozen small ones. They won't bite any more now—sulky beggars! I must wait till the afternoon. Will you come and lunch?"

He laid his hand on her knee mischievously, and made her flinch and protest as he knew she would. It was a source of extreme amusement to him to have discovered that she was as sensitive to being tickled as a baby. If he passed his fingers lightly over her arms or the palms of her hands she could not help laughing and shrinking in a kind of exquisite revulsion.

"No, don't Ted, don't!" she implored, and almost slipped off the rock into the swirling pool to evade his teasing.

"If you be a fair maid,
As I suppose you be"—

he quoted—

"You will not laugh nor smile
At the tickling of your knee!"

She was both smiling and laughing in spite of herself, and could do nothing but implore him to stop. "It's so unfair!" she said. "It's only because my sense of touch is more developed than yours."

"What odd ideas you have, Vervie! How can one sense be more developed than another?"

"Oh, but it is! Don't you know how some people love scent and others are indifferent to it or don't like it? That is because their sense of smell is less developed. And you have a much finer palate than I have—you really *like* your food to the point of artistic enjoyment."

"That's only a polite way of saying that I am greedy!"

"It isn't, indeed. Why should people think that one sense is a higher attribute than another? It can't be. A sense is a sense. If you indulge it, it becomes gross. It is just as immoral to my mind to have an inordinate taste for music as it is for eating. It only means that one person has a more sensitive hearing, and the other the more sensitive taste. When such people become slaves to their own capacities they are equally guilty."

"Well, come and enjoy your sense of taste at lunch—though of course I shall enjoy mine far more!" he said laughing, as he lifted her off the rock. "I say, little woman, you won't catch cold with those wet feet, will you?"

"Oh no—I shall dry them in the sun!" she answered airily, but looked in vain for a landing place that should not cut the tender palms of her feet, for the banks of the river were one wild scramble of great stones and fissured slabs of granite. Egerton laughed at her dismayed face, and picking her up in his arms carried her cautiously along the rough pathway to the more open water he had been fishing. There he set her down with a kiss, and something subtly triumphant in his masterful handling of her, as might the first man who won the first woman by capture. The morning's encounter had made him a little assertive in brute strength, and of a ruthless mood she might not combat. . . .

Though it flowed through a wooded valley the Foliot gave the impatient impression of having flung back the vegetation on either bank by the mere force of its angry current. It was much checked and fretted by great boulders, but it was not necessary to dap with the natural fly instead of casting, the water being little overgrown. They had generally eaten their lunch out of doors, on the woody slopes above the river, when it was fine, Mrs. Pethick packing the creel for them, and fished again in a desultory fashion until they wanted tea, which they got at a farm or a cottage on their way home. There had been one or two partially wet days—all the better for the fishing—but the holiday had not disillusioned them as yet. When they reached home in the evening, hungry and happily tired, they had supper in the big airy parlour, and as like as not sat in the deep window-seat afterwards, Vervain's silky head against Egerton's shoulder, to smoke and talk. The girl's chief impression had been one of rest and guardianship; the man's a physical and mental craving satisfied.

They were rather popular with the villagers who were too accustomed to "fishing people" to speculate about them or to doubt their supposed matrimony. They were a godsend to the vicar, a gentle old bachelor who loved the folk-lore and antiquities of the neighbourhood and found Mrs. Egerton a ready listener. She had a prejudice against the clergy as a class who threatened her liberty of action and thought alike, perhaps inherited from her rebel father; but Mr. Peverell had upset her theories and made her a convert to himself at least. She did not suffer any scruples in the acquaintance, as Netta Pullman would assuredly have done in her circumstances,

partly because she would have said that it would only last for the holiday and that he would never see her again, and partly because she would acknowledge no responsibility in the matter.

"I am harming no one but myself, it cannot affect anyone else," she said. "If I like to take the risk that is my affair, no one else's."

She was conscious that it might be her own disaster, and that the man who was only a "Holiday Husband" to her was growing daily more of a reality in her life, not only for the temporary connection but for the years ahead that had to be lived without him. It seemed to her that she knew him better than he knew himself, and thought anxiously of the future in which she had no place. He was his own enemy, as she had warned him. It would limit his success in life, and yet it might so easily be averted. With the unconscious arrogance of her youth she fancied herself guiding and advancing a man who was thirteen years her senior, giving him the benefit of brain and character alike—a brain and character both undeveloped save by the hard necessity of her narrow circumstances. And yet she was not entirely at fault in this. Egerton was the more ordinary clay, and lost his opportunities through some want of enterprise in himself. She was learning the little peculiarities of his mind just as she did of his body. He had a fad for sleeping with his head rather high, and was convinced that it spoilt his night's rest if it were low. She had conceded him the harder, fatter pillow, and gave that laugh that ended in a sigh to watch him settle it on the bolster in exactly the position that he affected. He slept on his left side, and did not turn over on his back in

bed, after the fashion of most people. Perhaps this was one reason why he never snored. He hated scented soap, and insisted on buying a bar of the old-fashioned yellow to replace the cake in his dressing-room that Mrs. Pethick had specially provided for him as suited to a "London gentleman." They had had to make their one excursion in the little town of Lady's Folly to buy the soap, and it had been a day to Vervain of fierce and furtive avoidance of presents forced upon her with mistaken kindness. She had retaliated by buying him a tie which she knew he would never wear outside Widgery. Ties were his principal vanity—he seemed to collect them as some men do waistcoats—and he could not bear any-one to fold and put them away but himself. She was obliged to stop Mrs. Pethick paying him this attention for fear he became rabid. Vervain hardly realised that she knew these things about him until it was all over. Then they came back to her with a shock of familiarity.

She thought she knew him in a week; but she was still to discover traits of masculine character that remained a mystery to her to the end. The incident of the fight on the hillside furnished one of these. Ted's face was rather badly cut and more swollen than she had seen at first. When they started to return home she was dismayed to see that it was fast discolouring.

"What will you do?" she said anxiously, conscious that she was the cause of the annoyance to him and feeling the humiliation for them both. "Shall we tell Mrs. Pethick that you slipped over the boulders and cut and bruised yourself?"

He looked at her in a rather lofty surprise. "What on earth for?" he asked. "I don't want to tell lies about

it. A brute of a yokel was rude to my wife, and I licked him. They will see *his* face plainly enough, if he dares to show himself in the village!"

He laughed grimly, evidently rather pleased with his part in the affair. Vervain was absolutely silenced. She perceived that the savage who wears his scars as a decoration is blood-brother to the latest production of civilisation in a Norfolk jacket and immaculate ties.

CHAPTER VII

"For the sound of the city is weary,
As the people pass to and fro,
And the friendless faces are dreary
As they come, and thrill through us, and go;
And the ties that bind us the nearest
Of our error and weakness are born;
And our dear ones always hold dearest
Those parts of ourselves that we scorn."
—*Robert Buchanan.*

PERHAPS she had thought that the holiday would never really come to an end. Perhaps it never would have been final, but might have resulted in a hasty marriage, but for circumstances that caused a change of Egerton's plans and severed the temporary connection before they reached London again. A letter arrived for him on the evening of their last day (it had been overlooked in the morning's mail) telling him that his father had developed an incurable disease, and summoning him back to Gloucestershire for the few days that he must remain in England. It might be a rapid illness, or it might last for years, and his presence was necessary for certain arrangements with regard to the property, apart from any sentiment. He had meant to go down to his own home, anyhow, for twenty-four hours, to say good-bye; but the influence of his temporary matrimony had made him intend to take Vervain back to London, and certainly to see her again before he sailed. Now it was practically impossible. They must part at

Bristol, and he might have to leave London out of the question and join the mail steamer by a cross country journey in order to remain with his father until the last possible moment. It meant a great deal of inconvenience to him outside the inclination to return to the girl he called his wife, and gave him no opportunity for unavailing regrets or the temptation to prolong the connection with her.

The day of their departure was appropriately wet and rather chilly, for May is a capricious month and two weeks of generally fine weather had ended in blustering winds and a stormy sky. Vervain looked out at the forbidding moor country as they crossed it on the way to Exeter, and thought she had never seen anything so threatening as the gaunt grey tors and sullen purples of its vast outlines. Egerton was self-absorbed and worried, and they sat in silence most of the way with spasmodic efforts at conversation.

She was trying not to brood, not even to be sorry. After all, it had been her own risk—it could injure no one but herself; and for herself she would suffer silently. She looked at Lady's Folly as they entered the train, and forced herself to remember that Mr. Peverell had told her that it had originally been *The Ladies' Foliot*, the Foliot family having been landowners in this neighbourhood, and three old ladies having lived in the manor house between Widgery and the larger town. With them the Foliots had died out, but Lady's Folly had developed from a hamlet into quite a thriving place. She tried to speculate as to what those dead and gone dames were like, and not to see that troubled, bearded face opposite, with the tragedy returned to his

eyes. He had not looked tragic during their lost holiday. . . .

She stared at the busy platform of Exeter, and forced herself to wonder where all these people were going, and what were the interests in their lives. Then she followed the quiet, rich country as the train steamed out of St. Davids, and caught a glimpse of the river, and wondered if there were boating—anything, so as not to let herself realise that it was all coming to an end. Even now, in his distraction, he had not forgotten to order a lunch basket for her at Bristol, and to tip the guard to look after her. She had been well taken care of, at least, during this past fortnight, as he had promised—thought for, guarded, waited on, relieved of responsibility. This journey was the last of it. To-morrow—to-night even—she would be dependent on herself again, as a young man might be, guided by her own decision and deferring to no one else. The accustomed liberty had suddenly grown into a strange, boundless thing.

They had the carriage to themselves from Exeter. Egerton suddenly moved into a seat next to her, and took her hand, holding it closely between his own. But she was conscious that he had brought himself back to her presence with an effort and as a duty, and it hurt her far more than his absent-mindedness.

"Look here, little woman," he said gently, but without any ardour, "I want you to do me a favour."

She shrank involuntarily. "You needn't trouble, Ted," she said hastily. "I am not in the habit of making scenes, or writing sentimental letters. We settled when the holiday should end, and I shall just

go my way and you will go yours. Don't ask me to forgive you, or to be sensible—*please!*"

He had looked at her in some surprise when she began her eager, hurried speech. Now he laughed, more naturally than he had done all day, and slipped his arm round her shoulders, holding her firmly against him. The sudden relief that surged over her made her gasp to recognize that it was this that she had wanted—that she had missed the pressure of his arm already . . . and that to-morrow it would be gone beyond recall. . . .

"Don't be a little idiot!" he said with tender rudeness. "As if I did not know you were a well plucked 'un!—No, look here, dear. I can't go and leave you and know that you are such a forlorn little person as you used to be, with no one to turn to in—in trouble, or if you were hard up, you know. That damned League sweats you like any factory girl, and doesn't pay you a living wage! I've written to my agents in London to put a hundred pounds to your credit, and you can draw on that at any time. I sent them one of your signatures for identification. Now I want you to promise me that if you are in any mess you'll draw on that money until you can let me know. Will you?"

He put his hand under her small decided chin and turned her face to his, looking down with kindly protection and a very real love in his eyes. Why not? She had been his wife for a fortnight, he was still physically in love with her; and though he was accepting the severance of the whole connection it was as much the result of his circumstances as his own wish.

The pupils of the girl's eyes widened, narrowing the iris until they looked unusually dark. She did not cry,

though her throat ached with suppressed sobs; but she took a minute before she could be sure that her voice should be quite steady.

"It's awfully good of you, Ted. I'd rather not, you know."

"Never mind what you would rather. You must promise, for my sake. I know much more about the straits you might be in than you do."

Her lips smiled a little, so sadly that the cynical amusement did not alter the serious gaze of her great, clear eyes. "I have been making my own living for four years, with no one to depend on but myself. I ought to know about the straits that one can come to!" she said.

He would not argue further, or in detail. "Promise me!" he said earnestly.

"Oh very well, I promise. But I shall never come to straits in which I would touch the money!"

He gave a sigh of relief that made her wonder, and laid his lips against hers, kissing her with slow passion as if to satiate himself while there was yet time. She had a sense of exhaustion when he released her, and took the papers he thrust upon her, with trembling hands. One was the address of the agents; the other his own address in British Moldivia.

"I suppose I shall hear of you before you sail?" she said, looking at this last rather blankly.

"Oh yes, yes! of course you will. But I can't say when I may be able to leave my father—I don't even know if I may not have to ask for extension of leave—in case he were—worse."

"I know," she said quickly. "I understand. If you

—*don't* come back to London—if you—sail this week—just send me a wire, will you?"

His "I will!" was so full of suppressed feeling that it might have been said just so at the altar, and gave her a hideous sense of mockery. Then they were running into Bristol station, and she composed herself to say "I hope you will catch your connection. Where will you lunch?"

"Oh I'll manage that somehow," he said indifferently, as he jumped out of the carriage. "Look! here's your own lunch basket, I expect. What name, boy? Egerton?"

"Yes, sir."

"This lady."

He busied himself about her comfort to the end, though he had to go and see that his own luggage was not sent on with hers, returning just in time to take her hand through the carriage window as the train moved off.

"Good-bye, my darling!" he said, and the face and figure that had been so intimate for a fortnight receded with the platform and were gone.

Vervain sat back in her seat and opened the lunch basket. There were two other passengers who had got in at Bristol, but she did not see them. Her actions were mechanically composed, and she ate and drank through sheer strength of will, closed the basket and settled down to read the magazines and papers he had not forgotten to provide. This was the last time that she would travel first class, or have lunch baskets and magazines, and she made a fierce, pathetic effort to appreciate them as would have been his wish.

Oh, if she had only not taken him for her "Holiday Husband!" if she had only gone to Folkestone, and stayed the uneventful fortnight out as a paying guest!—Not for the sin of it—she scoffed at sin, much as her father might have done, in such a guise; but for the heart-racking emptiness of the world now that it was over, and the loss of the man and his tenderness. She did not ask herself if her budding attraction to Ted Egerton had bloomed into love during the fortnight; she did not analyse it to herself as a mental rather than a physical thing in contrast to his impatient passion that had at least been satisfied for the time; she only knew that the experience that had simply promised Adventure had ended in a sense of loneliness and loss that was almost intolerable.

She wanted him back—she wanted every little characteristic that had merely amused or interested her at first as a novelty, but that now were dear peculiarities almost sacred to himself. Even his faults and failures seemed to her something to guard and watch over with anxious tenderness, until she was more woman than girl in her emotion, more mother than wife. If she had committed a far more deadly sin than her reckless outrage of conventionality she was paying far too heavy a price.

How dark and sombre London looked after the little fishing village on the Moor, with its Spring green and cottage gardens! It was raining heavily, and she remembered drearily that she had provided no food at her lodging, had not even asked Netta to get her any, and would have to turn out again when she reached home to provide both for to-night and to-morrow

morning. The old grind of looking out for herself had begun again. She could not take it in the former philosophical spirit, having so recently been provided for and considered. Ted would never have allowed her to go out in the wet for her supper, she thought senselessly. But it was Ted's business no longer.

Then she remembered that both her suit-case and hat-box were in the front of the taxi and she could not change the labels before she got home. But it was dark enough in the entrance of the house, and no one was likely to read them. She felt that she did not care. Caution had become a secondary thing to her personal trouble. The house looked more shabby and squalid than ever before, and when she had got her luggage carried up to her room and unlocked the door, it was like entering into a prison or a death-chamber. She pulled up the blind hastily, and threw open the window, looking down into the wet, dirty street with a shudder. If it had not been for her breakfast to-morrow she would have made do with milkless tea and biscuits to-night, but she had to go back to her work, and she must not starve.

She had some food at an A.B.C. near Victoria, and supplied herself with bread, butter, milk, and eggs as being easy to cook.

"I suppose they will taste musty after Widgery eggs!" she thought as she trudged home with her parcels. Her room felt fresher for the open window, and the sense of familiar surroundings was coming back to her; but she was too restless to sit there alone, and after unpacking what she wanted for the night she ran down to Netta's room and knocked, almost praying that

her friend might be at home. Perhaps it was really a prayer, for it was answered by a cheery "Come in!" and she entered with the first feeling of relief that she had had all day.

Netta uttered an exclamation as she caught sight of her.

"So you're back! Why didn't you let me know? I'd have got supper for you here."

"It doesn't matter. I went out. You knew I had to be at work to-morrow."

"Yes, but you didn't write to say you were coming. I didn't know what to think." She paused, and looked at Vervain curiously, almost timidly, as if her beliefs and teaching received a shock by finding her as usual.

"You look very well!" she said involuntarily.

"People generally do look well when they have been living out-of-doors and eating and sleeping and doing nothing else," said Vervain dryly.

"You are quite sunburnt, and your face has filled out. You look years younger, Vervain!"

"I daresay."

"I thought—you would have looked older!"

Vervain looked up with that enigmatical smile that did not reach her eyes. "I daresay I shall, in time," she said. "Quite possibly after a few weeks of the old monotony underground!"

"Poor old girl! It's a hell of a life, isn't it?"

There was a consenting silence. Netta stole a furtive glance at the face that was so wonderfully improved by an illicit happiness, and looked far the more guilty of the two.

"Vervain," she said suddenly, leaning forward with

asking lips and eyes, "tell me—do you feel—humiliated? Are you very sorry that you ever did it?"

Vervain was assuredly very sorry—but from a different cause to the one that Netta meant. The attitude of the conventional penitent was so far from her that it troubled all Netta's conceived ideas.

"No," she said deliberately, and the young voice was hard as tempered steel. "If I am sorry for anything, it is—that it did not last longer!"

CHAPTER VIII

"Our love it ne'er was reckoned,
Yet good it is and true;
It's *half* the world to me, dear,
It's *all* the world to you!"

—*Thomas Hood.*

EGERTON did not return to London, or if he did so it was only on his way to Southampton. Four days after her own return Vervain found a telegram awaiting her when she came back from the office, telling her that he was sailing in the *Madeira River*, and would write from Trinidad. Four or five blank weeks stretched ahead of Vervain before she could even hear from him, and she turned upon herself savagely for her feeling of despondency.

"I always knew that it was only for the holiday—I faced it from the first," she said with bitten lips and hot, dry eyes. "I have only myself to thank. Well, at least it harms no one else."

Perhaps the forlorn feeling that she struggled against more than equalled the good that her holiday had done her, for the sunburn soon faded and her face went thinner again on a diet of hurried luncheons and non-descript meals at night. She was still a young growing thing which needed nourishment, and the output of work by which she earned her weekly wage was out of all proportion to it. Her eyes seemed to grow larger and more hungry in her desperate white face, and the

Committee ladies who had commented upon her improved appearance began to comment upon her deterioration.

"Really, she looks worse than before she went away! She must be very delicate. I hope she will not break down," said the Inspecting Member to the President.

Lady Mercia was too important a person to have had time for noticing the appearance of the staff. She had to consider the organisation of the League and the strain put upon its capacities; but not the organisation of its officials and the strain put upon them.

"The work has increased enormously during the past two or three years," she said with some natural satisfaction. "Look at our membership! I expect Miss Chalmont wants help occasionally. I shall suggest that members of the Committee undertake to go in certain mornings of the week, or perhaps we might manage to have a typist for a few hours a day to work under her. I know of a girl who wants training, and whom I have promised to help."

"Oh, I am often in the office," said Mrs. St. Ledger, rather resentful of the suggestion about the Committee. "And I can't say that I ever found her with too much to do. Only, she always looks tired, I think she is anæmic."

"If she is tired there must be a cause for it," said the President practically. "I shall certainly go into the question of a typist assistant. We cannot overwork the girls we employ."

She did not add that the untrained typist was a problem thrust upon her by a friend, and a difficult matter of which to dispose. Nobody wanted to suffer

for inevitable blunders and slowness while the beginner gained her experience—certainly not Lady Mercia, who was a busy woman with a large correspondence. But in the office the girl could no doubt undertake the mechanical part, and the copying of letters, etc., and do as she was told. That Miss Chalmont, with that tired look already upon her, should do the telling and training did not matter. Nor would it tax the funds of the society very much, as the girl would come for next to nothing on account of gaining experience in preference to paying for it in a recognised school.

“And it will be nice for Miss Chalmont to have someone to work with—it is lonely for her sitting in the office all day,” said Lady Mercia, and felt that she would confer a benefit all round in disposing of her own obligation.

Vervain had, naturally, no idea of the new disaster that threatened her; but she had, by a coincidence, decided that she would do what she had never done before—herself ask for a rise of salary both on account of the increasing work and her own necessity. For the first few weeks after her return to work it seemed to her that she could not endure the reaction, and that she must go under. She missed the physical well-being of the life, and she missed the mental stimulant of the man’s companionship. Only her sense of justice in having to suffer for her own folly, and being ready to suffer for it, could have pulled her through, but she never willingly looked back afterwards to those grim days in the artificial light instead of the upper air and sunshine, that matter-of-fact routine instead of the freedom of body and mind.

Then came Ted's letter. It was written on board, under the influence of reaction also, and the return to an environment familiar to him. It was not an unkind or a brutal letter, but it was absolutely unlike anything which Vervain had expected. He told her at some length of his father's illness, of how much it had upset family plans, but that as it seemed likely to last for years it had been hastily agreed that he should return to his work in British Moldivia, and if the end came suddenly it could not be helped. Then he told her a little about the people on board and one or two amusing incidents; and he expressed frank regret at not being able to see her again before leaving England, but she would see how impossible it was.

It was the letter of a man who was a little ashamed of himself and a little embarrassed, and who had not had time to miss her or to think seriously as to what their future relations might or ought to be. But the girl did not discount that or judge deliberately. She had fancied that she must be the immediate object in his mind once the pressing business of his father's illness was attended to, and that he would write in exactly the same strain as he had acted towards her or spoken to her. She found herself, suddenly, thrust outside the pale of his life, of a very secondary interest, treated indeed like a familiar and valued friend and no more. It seemed then, that the connection had really been an ephemeral thing, that he was quite content to end it—in her soreness of heart she almost persuaded herself that his letter showed that he *wished* to end it. All that she had ever heard of men's tiring of women once they had obtained them, came back to her with hideous

truth. Ted had grown tired, and had welcomed the necessity of his life that had conveniently thrust them apart and freed him from the compromising position. His letter had been simply a duty, because he was too decent a sort of man to go right away and never take any more notice of a girl who had given him as much as she had.

Her first bitter disappointment seemed to settle down into cold rage. Her pride hurt her more than her heart at the moment, and her one impatient desire was to write more finally than he had done and to prevent his ever seeing or hearing from her again. Had she been older she might have waited a little, or temporised, foreseeing that his fancy would certainly return to her and that he would then be far more at her mercy did she wish for revenge. Now was not the time to punish him, when he had distractions enough to compensate for her loss, and had had just time to forget a little—but not time enough to remember. In the utter silences of the giant forests where his work lay—the silence that had laid its finger on him, so that he never quite lost its influence—he would have time to revisit Widgery, to feel the absence of arms round his neck and petulant lips on his own, and to go down also into the abomination of desolation.

But Vervain Chalmont did not wait, and suffered for the crudeness of her youth for all her vaunted experience. She wrote a letter that had to be redrafted half a dozen times before it conveyed the impression she wished of unstudied candour and unangered judgment. It was good of him to write, she said frankly, and suggested thereby that she really had not expected

it; they had both known that it was only a "Holiday" affair, and would end with the holiday. It had been very jolly, hadn't it? She should never forget it, and if she were ever sentimental she should be so over dear little Widgery. "Still, I somehow don't want ever to see the place again—do you, Ted? When a thing's done it's done, and it's a mistake to try to repeat it. I know we think alike in this." Then she told him a few ludicrous incidents in her office work, in return for his of the voyage, and of an idea she had for attending dancing classes whereat a girl who had been at school with her was teaching all the new dances. She thought it would be good fun, and she wondered what her partners would be like. And though she did not exactly say "Don't write again," she knew that she had so managed to jar every taste and prejudice he had that he would not want to do so. Even that suggestion about the dancing class conjured up a vision of her learning to "Boston" with a partner from anywhere, and had been carefully chosen for its second-rate flavour. She had not known Ted Edgerton intimately for nothing.

"Certainly I am clever!" said Vervain cynically, as she stamped and addressed the letter. "I wonder where my cleverness will finally lead me?"

It was after this that the Committee noticed her looks. She knew that she was looking ill, and despised her body in that it could not fight as did her mind. One man—even Egerton—should not reduce her to the type of the tearful female, weeping over his defection. She would go down with her back to the wall, if go down she must, and she looked round for some new, defiant

interest to take his place. The difficulty was that whatever she took up would cost money, and she was always faced with the undeniable fact that she could not afford it. Even the dancing classes would have meant certain disbursements if she had really gone in for them, and it was the same with everything that she attempted, until she felt as if she were in a blind alley with no way out.

The education at the charitable institution had really been exceptionally good, and though it had ceased for her, at sixteen it had left her well equipped. She had neglected her classical and modern languages since she began to earn her own living, and wished feverishly to work at them again in class; but, once more, classes cost money, and the bus fares to get to and from the place where they were held, since there were none within walking distance of her neighbourhood. She would have liked to go to theatres, but it meant standing in queues for long beforehand to get a good seat in the cheapest portion of the house, and it must, of course, be the evening performance after her work was done and her evening meal snatched. She could not afford to book her seat. Here was the *cul de sac* again. The free shows of London were all closed by the time she left work, but she went to such as remained open on Sundays for workers like herself. Preachers, even the best, did not attract Vervain Chalmont, or choral services either, so that source of recreation remained untapped.

At last she decided that as money was necessary to unlock any door that led to distraction she must make a fresh effort to get it, and decided to lay her request before the Committee of the League. When she had

been promoted to secretary at eighteen she had been given an extra twenty pounds a year in bare justice, because she took the sole responsibility and the whole work. Since then she had had five pounds a year rise, chiefly because certain subscribers to the League were interested in women's wage and not afraid to say that the salary paid to the secretary was not sufficient for her to live on. The Finance Committee had somewhat hastily succumbed to pressure, not liking the imputation of sweated labour. Vervain knew this from various sources, and had not looked for a further rise for a year or so unless the League grew so much larger and more prosperous that it was impossible to ignore the claims of the Staff. The work had certainly increased but the receipts had not done so to the same extent—she could have told why better than any woman on the Committees, and have suggested remedies, drastic though not impossible; but she was not asked to do more than prompt the Honorary Secretary at the meetings.

Before finally committing herself by putting her case before the President, she went to see Mrs. Seymour and ask her advice, one evening in September. The familiar flat looked even more attractive than when she had been caretaking there, with the addition of flowers and many valuable trifles that had been put away by her own request. Mrs. Seymour was at home with the cats, having a cold that had expressed itself obviously in a swelled face, and Vervain was fortunate in finding her alone in consequence on a Sunday afternoon, since she had no other day on which to call and it is a universal visiting time in London.

"Come in, my dear, though I feel perfectly wretched!" said her hostess kindly. "I have said 'Not at home' to everyone else, but when Alday brought me your name I felt I must make an exception—you so seldom come to see me."

"I so seldom have the chance," said Vervain gently. "I am sorry you are ill! Would you rather I went away and came next Sunday?"

"No—there might be a crowd, and I should see nothing of you. People call on Sunday afternoons as religiously as they go to church in the mornings. I hope to be visible again by then."

"What has been the matter?"

"I had to have my teeth overhauled and be generally patched up, and I caught a cold on top of it. How expensive one is as one grows older!"

She looked at the thin, shabby girl with a faint envy that seemed incredulous to Vervain, who saw only the results of the expense in Mrs. Seymour's face and figure.

"It was adding insult to injury that I should have caught cold after my heroism in facing an extraction! But tell me all about yourself," she added kindly, settling herself in her chair with a shiver in spite of the warm Autumn weather. She was really feverish with her chill, and it was generous of her to have put her disinclination for visitors on one side when she heard that the young secretary of the League had begged to see her. She listened with sympathy to Vervain's earnest explanation of her need for a little extra money for joining evening classes, though the girl did not confess the real urgent cause of her desire for distraction; and she obviously approved. But there was a somewhat

worried look on her face that Vervain was quick to notice. She had learned to observe people's faces, and to calculate for or against herself there, from the necessities of her life.

"My dear, I will do my best for you at the Finance Committee meeting, and I certainly think you ought to have the extra money. We waste it in a dozen silly ways and then underpay our staff. Look at those curtains of Mrs. St. Ledger's in the office! Now was there any necessity? Did you want sage-green curtains? They made me sick?"

"No, I didn't—but Mrs. St. Ledger did!"

"Exactly. And she carried her point against me and Miss Ruthven, the treasurer. But I am afraid things will go against you, because of this new assistant-typist fad of the President's. They must pay her something, even if she is a learner."

"A typist! But I always use the office machine for the letters myself."

"Yes, I know, it is quite unnecessary to my mind. But Lady Mercia has some wretched girl for a protégé whom she wants to put under you to learn office routine, and to take some of the correspondence off your hands. I don't know what you will say—but I am afraid it will be extra work in teaching her rather than a relief."

Vervain's expressive lips were rather set, and had gone white as they had once before in this very room when Ted Edgerton had brought things to a crisis. Her breath came a little quickly as she looked at Mrs. Seymour with startled eyes.

"But I have never asked for help!"

"I know you haven't." Mrs. Seymour was so honestly

annoyed that she was less discreet than usual. "It is a fad of Lady Mercia's in my opinion, and she is making your health an excuse to get this girl into the office when we really ought not to spend the money in such a way. Mrs. St. Ledger unfortunately noticed that you looked very fagged, and the President jumped at it for her own purposes."

For a minute Vervain did not speak. A happier circumstanced woman might have protested or complained, but she had learned the uselessness of crying out against power, in a rough school. When she did speak it was rather slowly.

"You think this girl is bound to be appointed, and that I shall have her on my hands?"

"I am afraid so."

"Then it is no use asking for a rise," said Vervain, with the hopeless acceptance of the single unit of Labour which has not combined with others against Capital. These women held her existence in their hands. She could leave, indeed, but her place was easily filled. If they liked to put a dozen extra burdens on her for their own private convenience, and to give her no compensation, she dared not revolt.

"What do you think about my writing to the Committee?" she said dully.

"If you like to try it, I will do my best for you."

"But you think it will do no good, I can see—it may even make them think I am dissatisfied and asking too much. I suppose I had better do nothing in the matter," said Vervain dispiritedly, as she rose to go. "I ought not to keep you talking any more—it is making you cough."

"Well, think it over, my dear—don't decide on the spur of the moment," said Mrs. Seymour. "You must come and see me again soon, as I have got this stupid cold to-day. We will arrange an evening, and have some bridge. Do you play bridge?"

"Yes, I like it. But I get no practice to speak of, and I don't play well."

"You ought to join a club"—then she remembered that the girl could not afford it, that it was just one of those recreations she had asked for, and she sighed impatiently.

One of the cats, the grey Hafez, had jumped on Ver-vain's knee and was lying there in a luxury of sleep. She lifted him carefully and kissed him, holding his soft head and ruff against her face for an instant as if the warmth and gentle purring comforted her. Then she put him in his mistress's lap and went away, her step lagging a little as if weighted with her present discouragement and past memories. She had been sitting in the very chair and the very position she had so often occupied when Edgerton was with her, but already it seemed a very long time ago.

"I am paying for it," she reminded herself, as she made her way home. "I said I was ready to pay, and I am. But there seems no way of forgetting. The only good thing about it is that I harmed no one but myself. Ted got off scot free as the man always does."

Instead of going up to her room she knocked at Netta's on the chance of her being in. She had seen little of Netta of late, for she shrank from her friend's silent comments on her looks, and the knowledge that

lay between them. During the Summer, Oliver Bate had usually taken his fiancée out for the day on Sunday, and, though the long days were past, the weather was still warm. Netta's voice did not answer as usual, but there was a sound of some sort in the room—an unfamiliar sound that made Vervain's heart beat oddly as she tried the door and found it open. She was upon the threshold before she could draw back with an apology, feeling that if it had been her own case she would have resented an intrusion. For Netta was crying.

"I'm awfully sorry!" said Vervain, hesitating, and not knowing whether to advance or retreat. "Anything wrong, Netta?"

The only possible explanation was a quarrel with Nolly, and Nolly was not one to quarrel. Unless—and her own experience flashed into her mind—Netta had had a row with her manager in the city, and was threatened with dismissal. That would be disaster indeed. She looked at the flushed, tear-stained face of the older girl with grave eyes.

"Come in—and shut the door," said Netta, in a voice that was unsteady with crying, and Vervain came in and sat down amongst the usual litter of clothes and books and writing materials that Netta never could keep tidy.

For a few minutes there was silence, and then, somehow, as she sat and looked at the heaving shoulders an awful suspicion of possibility began to darken Vervain's mind as if she were reading Netta's without words. There was nothing to go on, not a hint, and yet——

"Netta!" she said with sudden sharpness in her voice. "What is it? What have you been doing?"

Netta lifted her pleasant, matter-of-fact eyes, so blurred by tears, and looked at her with the frightened expression of a child caught out in some childish sin. It was so appealing and so ignorant that it seemed to thrust a weight of authority upon the younger girl.

"Come, you'll have to tell me!" she found herself saying through set lips. "Is it—Nolly?"

"Yes!"

"How could you be such a fool!"

"*You* did it!" said Netta quickly, removing the burden of initiative from her own shoulders. "And nothing came of it—it didn't do you any harm."

"You and I are different people," said Vervain, and the words surprised her with their difficulty. "Besides, I was not engaged. What I did affected nobody but myself. It was an experiment. I shouldn't try—experiments—with the man I meant to marry." She felt the bitter truth of what she said—now. It had not struck her at the time.

Netta looked down almost sullenly. "We should never have thought of it if you had not done it," she said.

"We!"

"Nolly thought you were looking so splendid when you came back—and I let out—about the holiday husband. He couldn't forget it. He kept on talking about it, and how—plucky it was of you!"

"Yes, but——" What she meant was "You cannot afford to do what I can. You are a weaker woman, and

cannot face consequences. Though I am eight years younger I have twice your character and will-power," but the words stuck in her throat. The acknowledgment of her own greater force made her instantly a leader and an example to this weaker nature, and forced on her the responsibility which she had disowned. Nolly ought to have known—Nolly, gaspingly admiring her pluck, must have recognised that Netta was made of very different clay.

A kind of rage seized her. She could have shaken Netta for her folly, and for thinking she could imitate herself. She knew that she had always influenced Netta, but that disaster might come of it she had not foreseen. Was she responsible? Was it impossible to limit the result of one's actions to oneself, after all? Supposing that in some occult fashion she was influencing everyone who came in contact with her—what an appalling thought! It robbed one of liberty of action at once. She would not be responsible—not for this threatened tragedy before her, at least. She made a motion with her hands as if she flung it away.

"Are you afraid of—consequences?" she said, and her throat was dry.

Netta nodded. She did not look up this time, and she seemed to realise her own failure in comparison with Vervain's immunity. Vervain had never meant to have a child. It seemed as if her own will power had safeguarded her, and she had never realised that one source of Ted's uneasiness, and the making her promise to go to his agent in a case of stress, was that he could not feel himself safe from reproach in the matter. It seemed

to her that there had never been any question of such a thing, and she looked at Netta with a sense of irritation.

"What are you going to do?" she said.

"I don't know. We ought to be married. I daren't press Nolly——"

"I will speak to Nolly—he's a good sort. I expect he hasn't realized . . ." said Vervain, curbing her temper and trying to speak gently. It gave her a sense of distaste to have to speak to Nolly on such a subject, knowing that he shared her secret; but only by assuring the marriage could she get rid of the reluctant sense of responsibility forced upon her. "It will be all right, Netta—don't you worry," she said, and laid her thin hand on the other girl's shoulder with a rare demonstration. Her clasp was comforting, for it suggested protection; but Netta could do nothing but cry.

"Oh, Vervain, I wish I hadn't—I wish you had not made it seem so—trivial. It didn't seem to matter, to *you*. What shall I do?—What shall I do?"

"You will get straight into bed, and go to sleep!" said Vervain dryly. "Come along—I'll tidy up this place while you are doing it."

She did not leave her charge until she was comfortably tucked up, and obviously sleepy from the exhaustion of her tears. Netta would be better in the morning, she might even have gained a second-hand courage and laugh at her own fears—though Nolly must be told anyhow, and the wedding definitely fixed. It was a mistake to rectify, a tangle to unravel, that was all. And then once more the responsibility would be at an end.

But long after she was herself in bed, and aching for

sleep that would not come, Vervain could hear Netta crying in fancy, and her unconsciously egotistical reproach—

“We should never have thought of it if you had not done it!”

CHAPTER IX

This is the story of a girl who failed—

They showed her blood and rapine, and the woman in her quailed.
Oh, the crimson tide before her might be brothers—must be
men!

And the story of a ravage struck her panic-wise—and then . . . ,

THE new typist was installed in due course, despite the opposition of some members of the Committee, and the deprecation of the Treasurer. She realised the worst of Vervain's forebodings, and if the working Secretary had consoled herself with a hope of congenial companionship it was for ever dispelled in the first half-hour that Miss Florrie Eden spent in the office.

She was a full-bodied girl with loose limbs and a long shapeless face that had plenty of flesh in it and few features. Her skin was moist and pink, and her mouth was rarely shut, which irritated Vervain Chalmont to an unreasonable extent. Miss Eden was a few years older than herself—an unkind Employment Bureau having elicited the fact that she was twenty-three—but when she first came to "learn office routine" she wore her hair doubled under on her neck and tied with the true Flapper bow. Vervain looked at her, and lost not one detail of her appearance, from the open neck of her coloured blouse to the openwork of her stockings. She did not say anything—it was not her business to warn a girl like *that*; but she waited with keen relish for the

faces of the Committee ladies when they drifted into the office and saw the new importation.

Well, after a time Miss Eden's appearance changed, in so far as her clothes and *coiffure* were concerned. One by one the airy blouse, and the display of neck and ankles, the side-combs with their false turquoise and the Flapper bow, disappeared; and left the regulation office uniform of a very neat blouse, a tidy head, and a dark serviceable coat and skirt. So much the Committee ladies could manage; but they could not make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, and Miss Eden remained in manner and mind what she was—the daughter of a small shop-keeper, who thought that a typing-clerkship was a "softer job" than serving behind her father's counter.

She had two weaknesses, as Vervain soon discovered—food and the Cinema shows. She would eat solidly at meals, and between meals if the cook were kind, and keep a bag of something in the table drawer to revert to with an air of exhaustion after short spells of enforced work—it seemed she was always munching. After a time the harassed Secretary, responsible for the other girl's work as well as her own, found that if she sent Miss Eden out of the room on any errand she was an unconscionably long time about it, and discovered that she invariably found her way to the kitchen, where she would sit on the table to dangle her long legs and talk to the cook and the waitress. It was not very much to be wondered at if she found their society attractive, since they all belonged to the same class, and it was obvious that sympathy of any kind was out of the question between her and Miss Chalmont.

In the first hours of her dawdling through the busy

day and trying to shirk work, Miss Eden had perhaps sought to propitiate the younger girl who was set in authority over her by suggesting an evening at the picture shows. Vervain, starving for distraction, had grasped at it, though she was somewhat staggered by the accentuated details of Florrie's appearance once they were free of the office. But she found that though they were supposed to share expenses, two-thirds of the burden fell on herself, the commercial spirit in Florrie being well developed. No doubt she thought that the Secretary was earning a much larger salary than herself, and should pay accordingly, ignoring the fact that she lived at home with her people and was only induced to work at all for the sake of a pocket-money wage—that most insidious of competitions to the real wage-earner.

“Why on earth did Lady Mercia take up this class of girl? What possible interest can she find in her?” thought Vervain amazed, watching the girl day after day in their forced companionship. The motive power had really been a little complicated, but it had originated in Lady Mercia laying herself under an obligation to a friend who in her turn asked for an opening for a protégé of her own who had confided her aspirations towards typewriting to her. This was Florrie, civil and obliging enough in the little shop, and posing as the young generation with yearnings towards a wider sphere. She was not by any means a bad-natured girl, but she was slovenly and lazy, and quick to take advantage of any position where she was paid for work which could be avoided. Honour or integrity were silly words to her, and she regarded Vervain as a crank on the

subject of duty—a disagreeable crank who unfortunately had the power to grind her into a semblance of efficiency, and seemed bent on doing it. The office would be much preferable without Miss Chalmont, in Florrie's opinion.

Vervain did not repeat the experiment of the Cinemas. She could not afford it, and to her secret disdain of Florrie was added an open contempt when she found that she did not "play fair." "Oh dear! another penny. I'm sitting on my purse—can't get at it without getting up and upsetting the show. I say, Miss Chalmont, d'you mind paying, and we'll halve it later on!" Or, "Did you buy a programme? I didn't mean to—well, you can just tell me what's coming, can't you?"

"Serves me right for going out with her!" thought Vervain wrathfully. She observed a budding acquaintance between Florrie and a youth who sat next to her and who entered into conversation, some giggling, and the proffer of chocolates. When did Florrie ever refuse anything to eat? It was generous of her to pass the bag. "No thank you!" said Vervain, with her head in the air, and the atmosphere seemed to grow perceptibly colder.

"I suppose she would have spent the evening with him, if I had not been here," thought Vervain, disgustedly. "Is that the sort of thing she likes—to go to picture shows, and pick up the first man she meets as an escort?"

Then she suddenly remembered a chance encounter in the Tube, driving rain, an umbrella offered to her—and all the long sequence of results. In what was this so much better than Florrie and her underbred facility for making friends? "If she knew, it is she who would

despise me!" thought Vervain, and Nemesis kept touch with her as in Netta's untidy room.

She wondered, with a sense of revulsion, whether her own action would have influenced Florrie Eden as it had Netta Pullman, if the girl had known of it. It seemed extremely likely, since Florrie was so easily accessible to the opposite sex, and Vervain began to speculate morbidly as to whether the mere association with herself might unconsciously affect her. So much already had the realisation of a horrid responsibility forced upon a mind that had professed being a law to itself. With a restless desire to remedy the harm already done to Netta she lay in wait for Nolly Bate and after some manœuvring met him one evening on the doorstep of her lodging, when she knew that Netta was not yet come back from work.

"Come up to my room and wait," she said with unusual accommodation, for she had never offered him hospitality before, except when Netta had once brought him up to a picnic tea with two other old schoolfellows who chanced to be in London. He accepted, in the present instance, with an appreciative alacrity that made her wince a little. No doubt he was thinking the invitation a characteristic piece of independence, and admiring her secretly as a free lance—a girl who went away with a "holiday husband" and came back all the better for it! It was so little what she wished him to think that it roused her to curbed resentment. It had not been a good joke, that holiday—it had resulted in bitter mental experience if not physical.

Vervain's combined room was as satisfactory as such a place might be made. The house had possibly been a

good one once, and even the attics were large and airy though the window was practically in the sloping roof. The bedstead was of dark painted wood to imitate walnut and covered with a self-coloured counterpane of greyish mauve. The same tone was in the cretonne that upholstered the two basket chairs, and hung over a corner devoted to the washstand and bath; but there were two delightful deep cupboards in which all clothes, both Winter and Summer, could be hidden away. The dressing-table was of the same dark stained wood as the bed, and not obtrusive though it stood in a good light; there was a small dwarf bookcase, and beside the fireplace the oil stove and kettle that all working-women love as their best friend. But the most ingenious contrivance was the rather high table that carried Vervain's own small typewriter—the only expensive present she had ever received, a parting gift, by subscription, from her schoolmates when she left school. The table looked solid, and was covered with the same art cretonne as the chairs; but as a matter of fact it consisted of a strong square hamper and an officer's metal suit-case which she had bought second-hand for the bestowal of such small properties as would not go in the cupboards or the drawers of her chest. Thus her heavy luggage practically formed part of her household effects, and did not lumber up valued space, while the suit-case and hat-box of ordinary travelling lived in the remote corners of the cupboard. The walls were distempered a cool, unemotional grey, and the whole effect of the room was rather ascetic. But Nolly evidently liked it from his glance round as he dropped into one of the basket chairs.

"I say, you are jolly neat up here!" he said. "Netta spreads her gear all over the shop!"

The delicate brows contracted a little over the liquid eyes of his hearer. Netta's room was evidently too familiar to him—far too familiar. Yet had she known, Nolly had been careful of his fiancée's reputation, and had not been nearly such an importunate visitor at Tachbrook Street as Egerton had at Marston Mansions.

"Light up, Nolly—I'm going to make tea," said Vervain briefly, as she put the kettle on the oil stove and laid the little low table between the two chairs. The young man lit his cigarette, and watched her appreciatively.

"You're home early to-day, Vervain?"

"Yes," said the girl deliberately, as she made the tea. "I asked for leave, and came back to see if I could catch you before Netta came in. I knew you were coming this evening, and I knew she would be late because she telephoned me a message for you in case I saw you."

He looked a little surprised, his natural thought being that it must be something pressing that had brought Vervain Chalmont back as Netta's messenger.

"Did you come home on purpose?" he said.

"Not for Netta. She only 'phoned on the chance."

"Is anything wrong?"

She looked him steadily between the eyes. "Netta is in trouble, Nolly," she said.

He flushed up to his ordinary brown hair, worn as many city men were beginning to wear it in imitation of the "dudes" of musical comedy, without any parting; in a smatted sweep up from the forehead. Nolly

was not exceptionally good-looking or especially plain; he would have been difficult to distinguish from a hundred other clerks in a hundred other offices. But he looked honest, and by no means the intentional seducer.

"Has she—told you?" he said in a lower tone.

Vervain nodded. "Yes, but she hasn't told you!"

He was startled now. "What?" he said.

"You'll have to get married, Nolly," said Vervain, in a take-it-for-granted tone, while her heart beat quickly and some pulse in her throat threatened to choke her. Supposing he refused! Supposing she were doing more harm than good!

But he seemed more shocked than anything else. 'You don't mean——? Poor girl! Poor Netta!' he exclaimed, leaning forward in his excitement so that the chair creaked and reminded Vervain that he was the solid build of a rather animal type after all. "Of course, we must get hitched up at once!" he said simply, in open concern, and with no suggestion of reluctance or desire to procrastinate.

The sudden relief from anxiety and the strain of the moment was so acute that Vervain could not speak. She smiled tremulously, and busied herself with going to the stove for hot water, thereby turning her back on him. "Yes, I knew you'd see it that way, Nolly," she said after a minute. "The sooner the better, you know. She'll have to explain to her manager that she's married, and—and—all that," she ended lamely.

Nolly was fidgeting with his cigarette case with a down bent head. The nape of his neck was still rather red as if the blood had risen all over him.

"I say, Vervain, I never thought of this—you know

I wouldn't have got my darling girl into trouble willingly—you know that, don't you?" he said anxiously, with a glance that was almost diffident at the sharp white outlines of Vervain's face. She did not certainly look now as she had done when he had described her as "so jolly fit!" and yet she had come to no harm—no harm! There was something about her that had always overawed Nolly a little, though he knew that she was eight years younger than his fiancée, a mere slip of a girl, with arresting eyes but no solid comeliness like Netta's. Perhaps he was afraid of her temper, having once or twice seen her roused. "If she's angry you get it straight in the neck!" he had confided to Netta about her friend.

Vervain looked at him now with those arresting eyes as if she saw not him but something she was more reluctant to face. "No, I know you didn't mean to get Netta into trouble, Nolly," she said slowly. "You would never have thought of it if—I had not put it into your head, would you!"

He looked still more uncomfortable, and muttered something about having been two young fools, he and Netta. But he did not deny her suggestion.

"Well, the best thing you can do is to put things straight as soon as possible," said Vervain, with a long sigh. "You'd better go down and talk to Netta now, and arrange it all. I expect she's got back."

She watched him go soberly downstairs a few minutes later, and tried to congratulate herself that it was all right after all—they had been two young fools, but it need not matter. Only, there was an irritating sense that Netta's marriage was never to have been like this,

a hurried and furtive thing, done with as few witnesses as possible lest they should guess something that would become a certainty when the child was born. Netta was to have been married in white, with the regulation fuss as far as means would allow her, and bridesmaids and confetti and a wedding cake and at least a week's honeymoon. It had been a cherished project with both her and Nolly that they should be married in the well-known church where they first met, by the celebrated preacher who knew them both and accepted their homage. He and his wife would probably have had the wedding-breakfast at their own vicarage, and shown the young couple endless kindness and generosity. All that was impossible now, and there must be a shamed half-confession of a hurried wedding kept secret from these valuable friends, who would not only be hurt but startled at the revelation.

"I was not responsible," said Vervain Chalmont desperately, sitting in her darkening room in the October dusk. "Why should I blame myself because of Netta's innate weakness? I could afford to do what she couldn't, that is all. I am not responsible—I will not be responsible for anyone but myself!"

But the sense of having been an active agent in the affair clung to her all through the weeks that followed, during which Nolly had the banns put up in an obscure place of worship in the city, and made hurried arrangements for "putting things right" at the earliest possible moment. It was awkward for Nolly, who was waiting for a rise of salary and more definite prospects before he could afford the little mutual home that decency exacted. He lived in rooms with another clerk

whose landlady boarded them both, and made them far more comfortable than the girls were, after the tradition of men. He could not take Netta there, and for the present it was settled that she must remain where she was, and have the embarrassments but none of the advantages of married life. The wedding ring was the great thing, and with her mind and will set on that Vervain wore through all the preceding weeks, vetoing Netta's desire for a white gown at any rate, as too conspicuous, helping Nolly in consultation at every fresh *impasse*, aiding and abetting, until one cold grey November day she stood at the altar rails beside the bride and saw the ring put on her finger and the legal contract fulfilled. There was no one in the church but herself and the verger, beside the bride and bridegroom and the officiating clergyman. She wondered desperately what Nolly had said to the young priest, he looked at them all so gravely and his quiet manner afterwards in the vestry was so reserved. Netta was relieved and grateful, but she had not been far off tears all through the ceremony, and the happy elation that she should have felt was sobered to something that was very like humiliation—a poor equivalent!

As she stooped to sign the register Vervain wondered if it would have been her case to be humiliated and subdued suppose she had stood in Widgery Church with Edgerton and Mr. Peverell had made them really man and wife. Sometimes her thoughts had taken that wild flight during the holiday, and she had fancied Ted suggesting it instead of the parting that really ensued, and their confiding in the Vicar as a matter of course. It had never occurred to her that he would be shocked or

resentful, or place her in the position of a penitent; but she saw now that this might have happened. And it struck her as ironical that it was to herself on this occasion that the clergyman showed most deference and directed his few remarks, as to one who had loyally stood by a woman friend in trouble and had been present as a witness to the sanctifying bond of her marriage!

"Chalmont?" he said, looking at her signature. "I know a family of that name in Buckinghamshire—the Wedderburn-Chalmonts. It is rather an unusual name. I wonder if you are any relation to them?"

"Oh, yes, it is the same family," said Vervain indifferently. "My father's name was Wedderburn. But he never had any connection with the Buckinghamshire people—he was too poor!" she added with unintentional satire.

The clergyman smiled a little deprecatingly. "I hope that need not divide a family," he said. "They are really charming people. You would like them very much," and he looked at the peculiar, too delicate face, and decided that she was far more refined than either of her companions—the ordinary city young man who had just "put things right" with the rather pretty middle-class young woman, as he very well knew.

"Yes, but they would not like me!" said Vervain with an enigmatical smile as she followed the newly-married couple out of the depressing church.

It seemed such a travesty of a wedding, even when they went to a small restaurant and had a nondescript meal with glasses of port wine, and tried to be convivial. Nolly had arranged the wedding for Saturday after-

noon, in order that he might at least take Netta down to Southend until the Sunday night, though they must both be in business on Monday, and then the new Mrs. Bate would come back to her room in Tachbrook Street for an unsatisfactory and indefinite period. Vervain said good-bye to them at the restaurant door, and while Nolly paid the bill Netta drew her hurriedly aside for a breathless moment.

"I can't ever thank you, Vervie—you've been a brick to see it through!" she said.

"I felt I ought to!" Vervain blurted out, and then turned on herself and asked why of her own reasoning powers. She had not meant to say that, to admit responsibility. What was it to do with her if Netta had played the fool? She had no call to feel that she ought to see her through it, save the abstract one of friendship.

But Netta, like Nolly, accepted the involuntary admission and did not contradict it.

CHAPTER X

"Girls of to-day! Give ear!
Never since time began
Has come to the race of man
A year, a day, an hour,
So full of promise and power
As the time that now is here!"

—C. P. Stetson.

FINISHED, Miss Eden?"

"No—five minutes, Miss Chalmont."

Vervain waited with grim determination, her glance on the clock every now and then while she looked up the report of the last Finance Committee and made a few notes for the Treasurer. The five minutes passed, and the office typewriter was still going with more haste than promised accuracy. It was significant of her attitude with regard to Florrie that she never addressed her as "Eden," after the familiar fashion of young men—an office freedom which she would certainly have taken with any more possible girl. Florrie, however, did not miss the familiarity. She belonged to a type that only uses a surname with a playful Y attached.

"Finished, Miss Eden?"

"No, I haven't," said Florrie snappishly, conscious that she had taken advantage of the Secretary's absence this afternoon to slip into the kitchen and "get a bit of bread and jam" from cook. Vervain had been sent to the London Docks with a departing member, leaving her assistant in charge, though she had protested urgently

to the Committee that since there was now someone to share the work it was the subordinate who should be sent to see Colonial ladies into boats and trains and not the secretary. Florrie had been sent once, but she proved so unsatisfactory, causing a member to miss a boat-train, and reflecting incompetence on the League, that the General Committee decided that Miss Eden did not understand the work and that it was better to leave it to someone who did. When the secretary had to undertake this duty, as to-day, Florrie took gleeful advantage to shirk the hateful work daily forced from her, and when Vervain wanted to leave the office there was still correspondence that must be finished and initialled by her before post-time.

"You ought to have got through those letters by now. What on earth have you been doing this afternoon?" asked Vervain in the dead-level tone of utter weariness. She had suffered from physical fatigue at the Docks, for she was not feeding herself even as well as she used to do owing to a new interest in her life that strained her resources, and she felt that the driving of an older, and intentionally stupid girl was a burden too heavy for her slight shoulders. To get Florrie through even a fair amount of work meant an equal output of nervous energy on the part of anyone over her, and the Committee had twice complained of inaccuracy and once of a rather serious mistake passed by their harassed secretary who was, of course, responsible.

Florrie did not explain what she had been doing in her chief's absence. She sat sullenly over her task like a child at school, dawdling intentionally towards the end because she knew that Miss Chalmont wanted to go.

She had grown to dislike the secretary. If Vervain would have shut her eyes to the visits to the kitchen, or had made a personal friend of her, she might have tried to work harder out of good-nature; but the unyielding insistence on the rules of the League, and the constant driving, made her vindictive. She waited an opportunity to "get her knife into Chally," as she, of course, called her behind her back, and would have called her to her face if she had received the least encouragement.

By the time the letters were signed and posted, and the books and petty cash were locked away, it was six o'clock, and Vervain felt a primeval impulse to strike the long featureless face at which Florrie was simpering in the glass. She knew that some of the delay had been intentional, and that the typist was secretly rejoicing over her disappointment.

"Going to the Suffrage meeting this evening?" said Florrie, with her hat pins in her mouth.

"No—I shall be too late."

"Oh, what a pity! And all those forcibly-fed women speaking!"

"If you had done your work decently this afternoon, instead of sneaking into the kitchen, we should have been able to leave an hour ago!" said Vervain, with repressed fury, her irritated nerves threatening to give way.

"I wasn't in the kitchen. What d'you mean?"

"I mean that you were in the kitchen, stuffing, I suppose!" said Vervain, with intentional coolness. She had forgotten her dignity as the secretary, and that this was not the way to speak to a subordinate, and reverted to

the old school-girl slang and the school-girl contempt for a glutton. After all, she was not yet twenty-two.

"I never left the office!" said Florrie, lying for lack of a better prepared defence—she had not expected a point blank accusation. "I had tea brought in."

"Oh, then Jane and cook were mistaken—they thought you did. No doubt it was your astral body that sat on the table and ate bread and jam. Funny thing for a spirit to do!"

"The sneaks!" said Florrie, virtuously indignant with Jane and cook for betraying her. "Yes, I forgot—I did go in for a minute to tell cook not to make a smell. She was burning something, and there were some ladies in the recreation room." If she had had time she would have thought of this tale from the first.

"Not a minute," said Vervain amicably, "half-an-hour! Cook doesn't like people hindering her when she has a good many teas to get, and it is a strict rule of the League that the office staff shall not interfere with the kitchen staff, but only report inefficiency. If you will kindly remember, for the future, Miss Eden." She was so angry that she began to enjoy baiting the other girl.

"I'll give Jane ginger before I've done!" muttered Florrie, dragging her coat on viciously. "Miss Chalmont—are you going to report me?"

"I hope not—I'm sick of reporting you!" said Vervain crudely, as she turned to go. "But it's not your business to ask that question of me. You will find out in plenty of time if you are reported."

"I'd like to get a chance to report you, and I will too, before I've done!" said Florrie vindictively to the

closed door as soon as her superior had gone. It was an idle threat, for the secretary was, if anything, over zealous and efficient, while her own work was so glaringly second-rate that the Committee were getting tired of hearing it reported or excused. But people looking for an instrument of ill-will to their neighbours will rarely fail to find it so long as they are on devil's service.

The Suffrage meeting that Vervain Chalmont had missed was specially desired by her hungry heart, since it was likely to put the wrongs and the heroics of women in a lurid light. She had always been an advocate of women's rights, partly from personal hardship, partly from her father's traditions, though his extreme views had caused a kind of reaction in his shrewder children. Vervain had read his writings on Socialism, which were of the most extreme type founded on ideals of humanity certainly not justified by experience. The habit of logic taught to her at school forced her to admit to herself that her Socialism was by no means that of equality any more than is the bulk of the labouring classes'. She wanted the advantages and pleasures of the present system with the even distribution of wealth—a combination impossible in its very nature. For instance, she saw that in a true Socialistic State there could be no private motor-cars; there would be State-owned vehicles, as perfectly run and fitted as might be, but for public use. And she knew that for her the desirability would be gone though not the convenience. She wanted a private car such as rich people owned—she did not want a seat in a State-owned vehicle, however perfect. But there would be no richer people, and so the comparison was ruled out at once, and she was left with her equality and her seat in

a public conveyance like everybody else—which had no charm for her. The instance may be childish, but it suggested an unstable basis to Vervain for her Socialism.

Her father had been an ardent champion of women from the arguments of Mill down to the early Fabians of his day. In this Vervain could bitterly concur, but she had not sought for a particular remedy, or imagined one in Female Suffrage, until that restless desire for an interest in life drove her to and fro upon the earth like a hungry ghost. It chanced that one Sunday afternoon she went for a walk in the Park for the sake of air and exercise rather than with a more definite object, and found herself in the midst of an uncomfortable crowd where some roughs were heckling the speakers, most of whom were women. Vervain would not have stayed to listen for preference, but once amongst them it was difficult to get out, and she stood quiet, waiting for the people in front of her to loosen and allow her to slip through. While she stood there she listened, and became first interested and then absorbed. Everything that the speaker happened to say seemed to suit her own case, and it was said very well. Vervain had never heard a really good speaker, or one with any personality, on the subject of the Suffrage, but this woman had both gifts. Her tone was entirely reasonable, her arguments seemed irrefutable. From that hour Vervain counted herself a convert, not recognising how much her need stretched out its hands to grasp whatever came nearest.

It was in the Cause—how many women have named it that!—that she began to pinch and starve herself that she might spend money on it. Even the massed meetings in various halls meant the payment for a seat, and there

was a constant appeal for money, and the papers to buy that published Suffrage news and views. She became soaked in the campaign and its promoters—no other word will express the immersion of her mind and will in it—and she told herself that here at last was the real object of her life, the central interest for which she had been unconsciously longing. Even her wounded love for Egerton and the brief experience of the holiday were blotted out for the feverish moment. She had found a Cause—the Cause of woman—to live and die for, and she was twenty-one!

It is probable that Vervain Chalmont had never really been so young in thought and action as during the period of her being a Suffragette. Her sad, homeless childhood, her narrow girlhood, were far older in mental experience and vision than the months during which she gave rein to every impulse of excitement and emotion. Certainly she was not honouring the cause by any measured thought or conviction, for she was extremely unbalanced and “heady” with the new wine of her enthusiasm. She screamed and stamped and yelled when Mrs. Pankhurst or Mrs. Drummond appeared on a platform, and she spoke of Miss Pankhurst as “Christabel” after the fashion of many older and wiser women who became her devotees. It was a phase as catching as measles, and nearly as high tempered.

There was some excuse for her delirium of spirits in the fact that she had made friends amongst the Suffragettes, and for the first time really mixed with her own sex on equal terms. Hitherto, she had always been a little the cleverer, the more original, the more resolute, even when she was the younger, from her school days

onwards. But these women were many of them as well or better educated, capable of thought, and often of good social position, and she felt amongst her peers or even ready to take "the seat lower." They encouraged her and loved her spirited championship, and there was little talked of amongst them save the Franchise, but the intercourse gave her a pleasure in life that seemed for the first time to fill all its necessities.

It was a red letter day when she walked in a procession, one of those great "peaceable demonstrations" that marked the moderate Suffragettes and their honest convictions as differing from the Militants. Even had it not been on a Saturday Vervain might have found it difficult to contrive, but she asked for the afternoon, and it was granted her with some reserve. The secretary was not supposed to take Saturday afternoons, the number of Mail boats and boat trains leaving the Docks and the great termini being exceptionally heavy. Any other afternoon in the week was more accessible than Saturday. But the Honorary Secretary supposed that it was some excursion only obtainable on the usual holiday, and accorded it for that reason. Vervain was too wise to disclose her object. She knew the hostility in which many people held the demonstrations, peaceable or otherwise, and she rather revelled in the thought of carrying out her project under the ban of disapproval though an unconscious one. For the Cause! For the Cause! Anyone who has not felt the glow and glory of sacrifice for a Cause, in youth, is surely the poorer.

She was unable to join the procession at its source, but she did what many others did as a sign of her adherence to the Woman's Movement, she came straight

away from the office without lunch, afforded herself a cab, and drove down to Pall Mall, the nearest point where she could touch the great column. She was lucky to fall in with it—thousands of women, all classes and all ages, marching silently and patiently by, behind their banners, quite oblivious, as if they were deaf, to the comments of the passers-by whose wit at their expense was certainly of the feeblest order. Vervain fell into step beside a girl with a dispatch case in one hand and an umbrella in the other, who nodded to her with friendly sympathy.

“Just found us?” she said.

“I couldn’t get off before,” said Vervain, breathlessly. She was tired and hungry already, but her eyes shone with the light of the fanatic out of her small white face. “I was so afraid I should miss you! Where did you join?”

“Oh, I’ve been with them from the start. Came straight away from my job,” said the girl. “Hulloa! we’re blocked. I hope it isn’t an obstruction.”

The procession had slowed to a halt, and stood waiting in orderly quiet. The great banners wavered and stopped, the women holding them easing their arms a little. One of them was just in front of Vervain and the other girl, and was carried by two women who looked too slight for the task but had been chosen for a special purpose—marked out for some personal distinction or for the yeoman’s service they had already shown. One of them seemed almost unable to support the honour of her standard-bearership, for the long pole dragged forward in her hands and nearly threw her off her balance. Vervain made an instinctive movement to help

her, but saw the banner caught and steadied by an older woman of more robust build, who changed places with her and lifted the pole more easily when the forward movement began again.

"I was just going to offer—but I don't know that I should have been of much use!" said Vervain, with a shrug of amusement at herself.

"No, you don't look the sturdy build for a banner bearer—those things are heavier than they look," said the other girl kindly. Her healthy, friendly eyes took in Vervain's face and figure with quiet comprehension. "Are you going the rest of the way with them?" she said.

"Of course I am—I wish I had been there from the beginning!"

"It's all the way down to Kensington—to the Albert Hall. You'll find it a long tramp. Had any lunch?"

"No time."

"Well, I must drop out presently, as I have to get home. If you will drop out with me we'll lunch somewhere together." In her heart she deprecated the chance of anyone falling out of the procession in a dead faint, and she thought the face next to her looked like it. It would give point to remarks by the roadside on the inferiority of women to men, in physique at least.

Vervain hesitated, struggling with herself. She wanted intensely to march with the Suffragettes all the way and to feel the indescribable thrill of being one with the movement. But she knew that she would hardly last the distance, and she hated having to fall out through weakness. She had been feeling ill of late, and had only been kept going by her frenzy for the Suffrage. Her

eyes went wistfully down the long vista in front of her, the sectional banners, the leaders walking on the flanks.

"Thanks!" she said, but without gratitude. "I meant to go in for the Meeting—but perhaps I had better not."

"Yes, it's a pity to miss it. But the great thing was to walk in the procession and show your sympathy with it."

The tactful speech cleared the air a little, and the two went as far as Knightsbridge and there dropped out, lunching modestly at an A.B.C., and going their several ways afterwards. This was one of the new friends that Vervain made, and the procession was to her a great experience and productive of no harm if she had been content to stop there, even though it is certain that the Colonial Women's League would have decided against the propriety of its secretary walking in a public demonstration as an avowed Suffragette.

But unfortunately it did not stop there. The tactics of the Moderates were too slow for Vervain as they were for others, and she began to see value in the Militants.

The excitement of rebellion was becoming like dram-drinking to her, some inherited tendency from her father no doubt developing under the new stimulus. There came a day when she found herself one of a raging crowd shrieking a war-cry of "Votes for Women!" and inclined to rush at friend and foe alike in their hysteria. She never knew quite how it happened, or when it began, for it did not seem to be an organised attempt. There had been a meeting—perhaps the police had interfered, or perhaps the bulk of the demonstrators had drifted down to Westminster. All she knew was that suddenly the world had gone mad, and she wanted to burn and

destroy, nothing else could satisfy the raging life in her. Young men in this mood would have committed some folly such as they did on boat-race night at the music halls. The Suffragettes began to throw stones and to wrestle with the police. It was as maddening as wine, the noise and the cheering each other on, the shouting of the battle-cry, and the stinging sense of resistance in the stolid forms of uniformed men. They stood for something tangible to fight against, for the excuse of oppression. For the moment the Cause itself seemed to have drifted down the wind, and they were all madly fighting for fighting's sake. Somebody said that they were in Downing Street—break the windows! It was not Downing Street, but break the windows by all means. Vervain felt the shouting and struggling in unison, and her veins were too full of blood. She ran straight into the grip of a policeman, laughing with rage, turned upon him like a wild-cat and bit and tore herself free . . . something snapped in her brain, and she found herself running along a side street as if all the furies of Hell were at her heels instead of in her heart.

If she were caught now and locked up it was the end of her. She would lose her situation and her living. The League would never forgive the publication of its secretary's name in the charge list as being amongst these wild women who had behaved like maniacs. It struck her suddenly that she had been a fool, and had done the Cause no good except for the advertisement. She could understand the value of militantism in the hands of leaders who used even the purely hysterical as tools for the one work they had in hand. They were single-minded women, these leaders, and spared nobody.

Yet as she sobered, Vervain saw that it was still incumbent on her to look after herself, as no one else had done it all her life, and that she had risked her future in her present debauch of excitement.

The one safeguard was that it was unlikely that anyone recognised her in that howling, fighting mob, and that her name would not appear in the papers. She went to the office in a rather silent frame of mind next day, and only roused herself to keep Florrie Eden rigidly to her duties. Florrie was unusually amenable, and even ingratiating. If she had had her ordinary wits about her this would have aroused Vervain's curiosity, if not her suspicions; but unluckily she was still self-absorbed in yesterday's untoward experience.

"I say"—Miss Eden took the welcome excuse to leave off typing to comment on the morning's paper. "I see there was an awful row after some Suffrage meeting, and a lot of Suffragettes got run in. Did you see anything of it? You so often go to the meetings!"

She looked at Vervain slyly out of her large-dull eyes, and the secretary stiffened.

"I never discuss Suffrage questions with people who are not really interested in the movement," she said coldly. "Please get on with your work, Miss Eden."

Florrie subsided, apparently snubbed into silence, and Vervain breathed the freer for not having to lie. As the day went on she lost her sense of apprehension and was lulled into a false security since she had escaped the public scandal of having been in the scuffle, and she was taken entirely by surprise when some weeks later she was asked to attend a specially convened meeting of a few prominent members of the General Committee and

the President. Vervain had hardly time to collect her wits, or to connect the summons with the recent street disturbance before the thing was upon her. Lady Mercia was at least a business woman in coming straight to the point. She asked the secretary to sit down at the table at which were gathered the Honorary Secretary, the Inspecting Member Mrs. St. Ledger, and two others, both titled women, with influence in the League.

"Miss Chalmont, it has been reported to us that you are an ardent Militant amongst the Suffragettes, and that you were in that last exhibition against the police. Is this true?" she said.

Vervain looked straight at her with grave eyes that seemed to the irritated President to see something afar off—almost as if she were looking *through* her interlocutor, indeed. There was no capitulation in the girl's white face, and she answered at once.

"Yes, Lady Mercia."

There was a moment's pause, as if the meeting hardly knew how to proceed. The Honorary Secretary fidgeted with the pens and ink needlessly placed at her disposal; Lady Kew, who was generally chairwoman at the General, glanced at Lady Mercia deprecatingly, and Mrs. St. Ledger looked with vague apprehension at the terribly young and terribly fragile girl who had just admitted a damning indictment against herself. Vervain had grown so thin that she was almost emaciated. Mrs. St. Ledger had a horrid feeling that somebody ought to take her in spite of personal convictions.

"I do not want to know your political opinions," said Lady Mercia in a dead-level voice. "You are, of course, free to think as you will, privately. But I should have

thought that being in a responsible position to the League would have made it *impossible* for you to mix yourself up in such a public affair!"

"I—regretted the incident as soon as I realised my position," said Vervain slowly, as if choosing her words. "It was not a premeditated act on my part. But I cannot offer excuses for the demonstration itself, as it is a thing that is bound to happen here and there—and will happen again and again!" she added with a touch of defiance.

"Really, Miss Chalmont, you cannot assert that such disgraceful scenes are not premeditated! I understand that they are part of your propaganda. What you must recognise is that so long as you are secretary to the League you cannot take part in any of these demonstrations. We cannot have it. If you had been one of those charged, or locked up, your position of trust here would certainly have got about and would have done irredeemable harm."

Lady Mercia was no longer speaking in a dead-level tone, or without bias. She happened to be entirely out of sympathy with the enfranchisement of women, and to be what was called an "Anti" by friends and foes of the movement. She was quite as fanatical on her side as Vervain Chalmont was on hers, but being an older woman she was not so liable to tilt at windmills as Donna Quixotes of twenty odd years.

Vervain did not answer for a moment. She had to collect her thoughts, and to consider bitterly that she must make concessions in order to keep the right to exist at all. In this hard and fast age we cannot even die for a Cause unless we are independent.

In the pause Lady Kew was heard saying, "Has this been going on long?"

"I do not know," said the President, with a touch of impatience. "Have you been a Militant for long, Miss Chalmont?"

"I have always been in favour of Women's Suffrage," said Vervain, with the stiltedness of her twenty years, and speaking with the ludicrous assumption of a lifetime of experience.

"How long have you attended their demonstrations?" asked Lady Kew more practically.

"For the last six months," said Vervain, wishing that she could have said six years. It sounded a sudden impulse, and not deep-rooted as she wished it to appear.

"Did you walk in that procession in the Autumn?" asked another lady with some hint of sympathy in her tone. They were none of them Militants, and they allowed that to have a secretary who might be locked up for a police fight at any moment, was impossible. But several of them were in favour of votes for women.

"Yes," said Vervain again, and some of the sense of union on that former day swept over her again, the glow and glory of walking in step with thousands of others, of one mind and purpose, and without the delirium of the later demonstration.

"They were quiet and dignified enough," said Mrs. St. Ledger quickly.

But the sense of latent opposition to her own views, and of secret sympathy for the secretary, roused Lady Mercia to more drastic prohibition. Her face flushed a little, and she used her authority as President to a more extreme point than the meeting expected.

"Whether such a demonstration is quiet or not is not the point," she said decidedly. "We cannot have a salaried official taking part in such a notorious and contentious movement as the enfranchisement of women. You must understand that from this time forth, Miss Chalmont. I am sorry that the subject should ever have been forced upon us, as you have been regarded up till now as conscientious and trustworthy."

The girl facing her down the length of the committee table did not grow any whiter, but she did seem to grow thinner and still more frail in some curious fashion, almost as if she would shrink visibly before their eyes with coming privation.

"If I gave my word to the League not to take part in Militant tactics and run the risk of—of detention, surely there would be no harm in my showing my loyalty to the Cause by joining in the processions and attending meetings!" she said, the words coming with difficulty, for she was fanatic enough to feel that she was unworthy in making even this compromise for her daily bread.

The members of Committee looked at each other and at Lady Mercia. Mrs. St. Ledger said hurriedly, "There does not seem to be much objection to that, if Miss Chalmont promises to abstain from militancy?" and the Honorary Secretary murmured something about everyone having their own political opinions. But the President vetoed the suggestion with an air of false logic.

"It is not a question of interfering with Miss Chalmont's opinions—it is simply that we cannot be associated, through her position here, with such a public movement," she said. "I should say the same if Miss Chalmont were a Non-Conformist and wished to attend

largely advertised meetings to disestablish the Church—we are non-political and non-contentious, and our staff must remain so also.”

“Perhaps you are right—demonstrations are the thin end of the wedge!” said Lady Kew with her unanswerable common-sense.

“Then,” said Vervain composedly, “there is nothing left for me to do but resign.”

She did not show her burning sense of injustice, or the anger that struck her like cold flame. She had at least learnt self-restraint through the years of her independence. At the moment she did not feel much fear or realise her disaster either, being buoyed up with a sense of her own martyrdom and sacrifice to the Cause. There were other berths besides that of secretary to the League, and possibly better pay, and she had five years record behind her. They could not refuse her a reference, even if they sought to damn her with the reason for her leaving them. Let them dismiss her! They might all go to the devil for all she cared—it was not for such as *these* that women were fighting for freedom!

There was, of course, some discussion before the resignation was accepted, and more compromise attempted. But neither Lady Mercia nor Vervain would give way further, and the matter remained at issue between the two of them. It must be remembered that Lady Mercia was not so much president as promoter and proprietor of the League, and had the casting vote. She had founded it and financed it, and was still its rescuer did it drift into deep waters of debt or difficulty. The meeting had certainly not expected that it would all be so final, and expressed a very genuine regret that the whole

affair could not be smoothed over; but the end of it was that Vervain Chalmont walked out of the committee-room with a month's notice, after having been the working secretary of the C.W.L. for five years, more or less, with new employment to find, and a period of some anxiety before her instead of the settled salary that had almost seemed unalterable.

As she put on her hat and coat in the eternal routine before the glass she glanced at the covered typewriter, and thought for the first time of the cause of her betrayal. Florrie Eden had left the office, as usual, at five o'clock—she never stayed a moment later for an accumulation of work unless there were someone there to enforce it—but her absence suggested a sneaking haste to avoid the result of the unofficial meeting.

"I did not see her—I could not see anyone in that crowd—but, of course, she must have seen me," thought Vervain. Then a grim smile curved her tightened lips. "I wonder if it was when I went for the constable and got him against the railings, or when we smashed the windows? Florrie must have been scared! I suppose she reported straight to Lady Mercia, who would, of course, listen to her pet!"

The thin lips curled savagely. Vervain smarted a little mentally from the humiliation of having been "chucked" through the agency of such a new-comer as Florrie, her subordinate and inferior in all ways, though she would not own it. She was cynical enough not to blame Florrie—after all, she would have got rid of her if she could, and had reported her blunders and inadequacy often enough to that end. She had been got rid of instead, that was all. The luck was with Florrie.

Somehow she had never thought that the League would let her go—perhaps she had fancied herself of too much importance to it. Her resignation must be submitted to the General Committee in the formal manner of course, but it was impossible that they would ask her to reconsider it with Lady Mercia in power. She was already dismissed, with a month's breathing space to look out for another situation. As she went out into Essex Street a sudden awful sense of homelessness swept over her, so sudden and so crushing that she instinctively pressed close to the hard wall of a building to shelter herself. She realised what Hood meant in the hackneyed Bridge of Sighs—

“From garret to basement,
She stood in amazement,
Houseless that night—”

and

“Near a whole City full,
Home she had none!”

Did prostitutes feel like this, she wondered, and ragged women of the streets? She looked up and up at the dark blank buildings that meant nothing to her, and recognised that they were as so many hands of steel thrusting her outside. It was a dreadful thing to have no place in any of them, not to be able to vision a single room inside any, or to have a corner to die in. Perhaps that might happen to her some day. . . . She clutched at the thought of the combined room in Tachbrook Street to which she was going back, as a refuge left to her—at present. The huge buildings of which she did not know the inside seemed to be crushing her. Even the familiar office with its artificial day seemed a sanc-

tuary in memory. But those endless streets, those repellent buildings with windows like closed eyes, began to numb her with horror.

"I hope I am not going to be ill!" said Vervain Chalmont.

CHAPTER XI

This is the story of a girl who failed—

They sent her forth with open face while other women veiled.
And all men could read her weakness in the sorrow of her eyes,
For they robbed her of a woman's surest safeguard of disguise.

I THINK if I wanted a permanent fit of the blues, or to become a rabid Socialist, I would go and sit day after day in an Employment Bureau for Women, and watch the faces coming and going, the anxiety, the discouragement, the dull disappointment that suggests despair somewhere in the future. Especially was this the case just before the War, when the labour market for women, even highly specialised, seemed to be at its lowest. Vervain Chalmont lost no time in putting her name down at various agencies, which were either most hopeful of finding her exactly what she wanted in plenty of time, or else told her with cruel honesty that secretaryships were as hard to get as black pearls, and nearly as precious

"If I can't get a secretaryship I must take a clerkship," said Vervain with a set mouth. She did not want to work in an office amongst other clerks after the responsibility and position that she had at least gained at the League, and the months of Florrie's enforced companionship had taught her what she might expect amongst other typists and stenographers. It was a drop in the wage-earning world instead of a rise, and she was keenly ambitious to rise. But beggars cannot be choosers.

"After all, if they pay me thirty shillings a week and give me regular hours, I ought to be grateful!" said Vervain grimly. "The League paid me £1 10s. 9d. it is true, but it worked me for nine or ten hours a day often enough."

But even clerkships, it seemed, were hard to get, or else did not pay more than twenty-five shillings a week. In Government offices it was even worse, for there she must begin at the foot of the ladder like a girl just out of school, with sixteen or seventeen shillings a week. The Employment Bureaus offered her work, it is true, but of variously impossible natures. They suggested in turn the matronship of a small boys' school in Sussex, salary thirty pounds a year and lodging, but not board; nursery governess to three children in the South of France (sole charge), companion to an invalid lady (mental case), booking-clerk to a private hotel in Bayswater, and superintendent at a Cookery School, with the duties of a caretaker and the added charge of the cloak-room. The companionship was the only situation which was paid a hundred a year, on account of the case being a mental one, and Vervain shuddered at the proposal and felt thankful that she could honestly say she had no training.

As the month went on, and she had not "settled" as domestic servants say, her manner grew more restless and her nerves on edge. The Bureaus grew afraid of her white face and feverish eyes, and thought her, privately, too neurotic for any position of trust such as she asked. As she had paid her fees, however, they were bound to offer her something, and irritated her with

ignoring her training and pressing situations on her that were more domestic than clerical.

"You see we really have no posts as a secretary open to women on our books at the moment, and as you are anxious for immediate employment you might try the other work and see how you like it?" one kindly woman said to her.

"I am anxious for employment—but I don't want to be employed as a mother's help!" said Vervain rather shortly. "It may come to that—but I will wait as long as I can."

She did not want to leave London, as it meant getting rid of the contents of her room, for she could not afford to pay for storage, and at present Netta had no home of her own where she could take her furniture for her; but as it neared her last week at the office she went after a post as correspondence clerk to a big wholesale firm in the Provinces, hoping that it might lead to a secretaryship even though she started in the counting-house. She was not very good at figures, though she could have kept the books for a small business, but if the correspondence were merely technical, and particularly if it were foreign, she knew herself capable. The post was, however, well paid as such things go, and she found herself one of a motley crowd, which made her despair of ever getting a hearing. Never was such a various collection of women, from stout females of fifty, who seemed to have tired of being cooks, to mere slips of girls of the Flapper type with a senior Oxford certificate from the Secondary Schools. Vervain knew the type. She sat and waited for an hour while others went in before her who had waited for an hour and a half, and then

was cursorily interviewed by a commercial gentleman who had made the mistake of allowing applicants to apply personally instead of by letter. Had they stated their qualifications in writing he could have weeded them out beforehand; now he had to do it personally, and had reached a point when he dismissed the likely with the unlikely. Vervain's appearance told against her too, here as well as at the Bureau. She looked ill, and she was too eager for the work to be a successful candidate. Beyond taking her name and address there was no hope held out to her, and she left the appointment feeling more frightened of the future than she had done yet.

What was she to do if she failed to get a situation for weeks or even months after she left the League? She had not saved anything, though at least she owed nothing. Some time since she had had two or three pounds hoarded against disaster—illness, or an accident, or some unforeseen tragedy; but one does not forestall illness at twenty, and perhaps the life at Widgery had made her less frugal. So the two or three pounds had melted away in small subscriptions to the Suffrage, and on the day that she finally left the office she did so with little more than her week's salary in hand.

She looked round the familiar place with apparent nonchalance as she collected her belongings and put on the inevitable raincoat at the monotonous glass for the last time. She did not know who would succeed her, or if the League had already engaged a secretary, but she wondered if the girl would come to her new duties with the high hopes she had herself, and leave with the same blank sense of failure. Florrie watched her furtively, with a fear of being found out that struck Vervain as

ludicrous. She had never charged Florrie with having turned informer, or even with having seen her in the Suffrage crowd, for however the girl had lied she would not have believed her. But it struck her as curious that Florrie should be afraid of her. She had been almost effusive for the last day or so, in her effort to disarm suspicion.

"You know *I* think its rotten that you're leaving!" she said, even up to the very last. "The League won't know what to do without you, and then they'll find out their mistake!"

"Good-bye, Miss Eden."

"*Good-bye!*" said Florrie, holding out a large moist hand, which Vervain took with scarcely perceptible hesitation. Her manners at least never failed her. "Have you settled anything yet?"

"Oh, I think I am going to take a job out of London," said Vervain, carelessly. "I find it is better pay."

She did not know if Florrie believed her, and she did not greatly care. Her head had been aching vilely all this last day, and all she longed for was to get home and go to bed. Thank Heaven! she need not rise early to-morrow. For the one morning at least she would treat it as a blessed holiday, an extra Sunday, and lie in bed.

She went across the passage to the kitchen to say good-bye to the servants, for they had been there as long as she had herself and there had been no hitch between the kitchen and office staffs until Florrie Eden came. Vervain had not known that she was popular with the cook and waitress, but when they shook hands with her heartily and expressed a generous and downright regret

at her leaving, she felt a curious aching in her throat, as she had last year at Widgery, and knew that she would have cried had she been Netta.

"Well, there, we musn't say too much, Miss Chalmont, seeing as we're in the employ of the League, but me and Jane's as sorry to say good-bye to *you*, Miss, as we shouldn't be to someone else!" Cook nodded in the direction of the office, where the typist was supposed to be still finishing up, and in all probability was eating gingerbread-nuts, of which she was extremely fond.

"Her ladyship made a mistake this time, President or no President!" said Jane stoutly. "And a shame it is to put that greedy glut in your place as never does any work, Miss!"

"Miss Eden!" said Vervain with slow amazement. She felt dazed, and cook's broad comely face was a blur before her tired eyes. "Do you mean that *Miss Eden* is to be the secretary?"

"So we heard, Miss Chalmont, though of course we can't say. Dear! dear! and didn't you even know, Miss? Well, there! I do say it's a shame! Like a great fat cuckoo she is, pushing you out of your own nest."

Vervain went into sudden irresistible laughter, the simile struck her as so apt. Florrie was very like that most selfish of all birds, incapable of building for herself but ready to appropriate others' property, and eager to shift the responsibility she had incurred on to other shoulders. Long after she had left the friendly kitchen behind and lost cook's and Jane's well-known faces, she laughed to herself still at cook's indignant simile, and forgot for the moment the ignominy of finding that her ill-trained, incapable substitute had supplanted her. Be-

sides, her head ached too much for her to be angry or indignant or anything but thankful to go home.

It ached more during the night, and so did her whole body. She slept fitfully, burning with fever or shivering with cold, and in the morning lay very still and faced the situation.

"Influenza," she said to herself. "I shall have to get up and push a note under Netta's door and ask her to send for a doctor. I don't want her to come up here and catch it."

She forced herself to get out of bed, and into some clothes, and scribbled a note saying what she wanted. Netta's room was on the floor below, and Vervain had small fear of meeting anyone at that hour in the morning. She carried out her programme, and got back into bed, too sick to make herself some tea as she had intended.

"I would rather lie still," she said in excuse. "I suppose somebody will come up to me sometime," and felt that she did not much care if they did or not.

Twenty minutes later Netta tried the door and found it locked.

"I'm all right," Vervain called out. "But I've got a temperature, and I don't want you to crock up. Go for the nearest doctor man on your way to work, there's a good soul."

"But Vervie, I've brought up your breakfast—you must let me in!" said Netta's voice persuasively through the door.

"I shan't!"—Vervain was iron-willed even in her extremity. "But you are a saint to make me some tea. Put it down, and go away."

Netta argued in vain. Vervain had her way as usual. She had to put the tray down and go off to the city reluctantly. Vervain knew that her chum would not very much longer be able to go to work, for her time was fast approaching; and she had no intention of allowing risks. But when Netta's step had safely died away and it was moderately certain that she had gone, Vervain got up again and took in the tray that she had left. There was fresh toast and butter, and fresh tea, and the sick girl said an unconscious grace as she drank thirstily and tried to eat. Netta would not fail her—the doctor would come presently. The friendships of working women are very faithful things.

She left the door open, for she had no fear for her landlady, that slow and stolid person being well calculated to look after her own safety. The hours ran on and the day lengthened, and no one came to disturb her or attend to her, so save for the restless discomfort of her aching body she lay supine, looking at the coloured pictures which her brain drew on the empty walls of her room, and wishing wearily that she could stop thinking if only for a little while.

It was April again. By a coincidence it was the very day on which she first met Ted in the Tube. She saw the rain lashing down the roadway and the "pennies" dancing on the pavement. And how wet he was!—she had made him take off his coat. That was a dear kitchen at the flat, so warm and cosy on a wet evening. . . .

Did the bridge at Widgery run north-west or north-east? North-west, of course, because the sunset struck across it into the village street and on to the windows

of Foliot Cottage. The wall-flowers liked that aspect. They smelt like spice and honey. You could not feel ill at Widgery, the air was so good. . . .

“When the flocks break up in March,
Will you pair with me?”—

A silly song. She did not know where she had heard it. . . .

Seven shillings a week was one pound eight a month for the room, and then there was food, and it cost something in 'bus and train fares to get to the Employment Bureaus. She had only two pounds in hand. That would not last very long. Netta ought not to help—not with the baby coming. . . .

Oh, this pain! . . .

The Suffrage procession marched along the further wall, and she saw, quite plainly, the face of the girl carrying the despatch case who had asked her to fall out and had lunched with her. Her name was Janet Sterling, and they had become friends since. Perhaps Janet could help her to get a job. . . .

“Like a great fat cuckoo she is, pushing you out of your own nest!” Cook’s red-faced championship came back to her, and made her laugh feebly. How was the fat cuckoo getting on to-day with no task-mistress to keep her up to the mark? What a time she must be having! What scores of gingerbread-nuts she could suck at while she dawdled the correspondence on into the afternoon! Oh, but the Hon. Sec. would be there to-day, to look after her—sure to. Awful bore for Florrie! It wouldn’t last, though. The Hon. Sec. always grew

tired of the office routine after a day or so. She said she worked better at home . . .

"When the flocks break up in March,
Will you pair with me?"—

There was Ted's hundred pounds, supposing that he had still left it to her credit after her letter. She might write to the agents and ask—

NO!

Mrs. Seymour had never been to the office since the special meeting convened to charge the secretary with being amongst the Militant Suffragettes. Perhaps she was irretrievably offended, and washed her hands of the whole matter. Vervain had not liked to write to her—she had felt humiliated in some odd, impersonal way, since she would not retract a word she had said to Lady Mercia. Mrs. Seymour might help her for the sake of former kindness . . .

"When the flocks break up in March,"—

Supposing Mrs. Seymour would not help her, and Janet Sterling could not, and the Bureaus kept her hanging about till that two pounds had gone—well, then—she must go too, she supposed. The typewriter might fetch something, and the furniture. And then there was Ted's hundred pounds—

NO!—

"I was not paid——" said Vervain, looking with haunted eyes at the blank wall. "Oh, God help me! I was not paid!"

A step sounded on the stair, running up. This was not the landlady or any woman friend—it was a man.

For the moment a curious feeling came over her, born of her fever, that it was Ted coming back all across the world to look after her. She did not want his tenderness now, or any hint of passion, but his guardianship—someone to turn to in her need. Ah! if it only were! Then the door opened almost before the knock had sounded on it, and the doctor came in.

He was kind and cheerful, but he asked too many questions.

"Temperature 102—I'll send you some stuff, and soon have that down. Who's looking after you?"

"My friend who came to tell you about me. She will be home about five to-day."

"The lady who was going to the city? Haven't you got any friends who could be with you all day?"

"All my friends are working women, like myself."

"Relations?"

"None in England."

"Your landlady?"

Vervain's fine lips twisted themselves. "She doesn't like the stairs—and I am only the tenant of the attic!"

"I'll speak to her."

He must have done so on his way out, for an hour or so later Vervain was wakened out of a doze to hear her landlady wheezing at the door.

"Miss Pullman arst me to look to you, Miss Chalmont, but I 'avn't bin able to come up before. And the doctor's sent some medicine—shall I put it by the bed and then you can take it for yourself?"

"Thank you," said Vervain languidly. "Could you tidy up the room a little, and put that tray outside for Miss Pullman when she comes in?"

"H'm! don't see much the matter with *your* room!" said Mrs. Shanks grudgingly, as she moved heavily about, wiping the wash-hand stand and dusting the dressing table with her black apron to Vervain's fastidious distaste. She wished she had not asked the woman to do anything to the room, and was thankful when she left, though the old procession of thoughts chased themselves through her brain when she was alone. Netta came in at five as she had expected, and brought up some tea, leaving it outside again because the door was once more locked. Nor would Vervain admit her at all for the next three days until her temperature was normal, and the doctor said that there was small risk of infection. She felt miserably weak and the face the glass showed her was so different to the one she had seen at Widgery that she wondered if Mrs. Pethick would have recognised her; but she was young, and the will to live in her brought her back to the struggle almost before she knew that she was down.

"Take it easy if you can," the doctor advised her, but he spoke with diffidence, for he knew the class of patients who live in combined rooms and have no one to sick nurse them but women in business like themselves. "If you catch a cold in these Spring winds you may have a relapse and be bad again."

"I shall have to go out and look for work, but I will be as careful as I can," said Vervain practically. She had no wish for a relapse, but the hard facts of the case did not allow of her taking care. She crept back to the Bureaus, and stood about waiting for omnibuses in an east wind, with the result that she went to bed again with a threatening of pneumonia.

She had written to her Suffrage friends to ask them to help her to a job, and they came to see her and promised to do all they could; but it was the waiting until help came that was becoming impossible. She had her typewriter to sell, but it was a valuable asset in getting work, and she had her watch—an old-fashioned Geneva watch that had belonged to Netta's mother and was given to her instead of to the older girl because Netta had received a new one on her coming-of-age. getting work, and she had her watch—an old-fashioned timepiece with its bunch of flowers engraved on the gold disc. She had loved Mrs. Pullman, whose influence was one of the few softening ones that had ever entered her life. But it might come to that. As she lay in bed again, breathing with difficulty, she recognised that she was very nearly "down and out," to use her own phraseology, and that only that "No!" stood between her need and Egerton's hundred pounds.

"Better to go to a woman than a man," said Vervain out of her sad philosophy. "Even though she turns her back on you. I'll write to Mrs. Seymour."

She did not know whether her former friend were away from London, but she received no answer to her letter, and she could do no more. If Mrs. Seymour had washed her hands of her on account of the Suffrage and that fracas with the police there was nothing to be done. She had begun to recognise that partisanship was running high over the Woman's Movement.

On the third day after she had written to Marston Mansions she was still lying in bed when there came a knock at the door and in answer to her hoarse "Come in!" Mrs. Seymour walked into the room. She was

panting a little from her climb up many stairs, and she stood at the end of the little wooden bedstead with something in her kindly eyes that made Vervain feel that she must be very ill or Mrs. Seymour would not look at her so. The impression was so strong upon her that without any greeting she said "I am really better. It is only this tiresome cough."

"I am glad that I did not see you when you were really worse, then!" said Mrs. Seymour, smiling. "My dear girl, what a long way up you live! I feel as if I were half-way on the road to Heaven, and the road is proverbially steep."

Vervain tried to laugh and the cough caught her breath and choked her. Mrs. Seymour stood and watched her with those contemplative eyes while she sought for remedies at the bedside, and when the paroxysm was over went on talking as if she had not been frightened—which was brave of her.

"Why didn't you write to me before?" she said. "I was away from home when you left the League, but I have been back for a week. I wondered what had become of you."

"I was afraid you were offended with me," said Vervain, fixing her hollow eyes on the older woman's reassuring face.

"I think you were very foolish to get mixed up with the Militants," said Mrs. Seymour dryly. "You knew the President's views, and you knew that it might lose you your employment. But I was not offended, and I might have saved your falling ill if you had come to me."

"It was the worry—I should be all right if I could get work and see my way."

"I have got you work. It is only temporary, but it is safe for six months." She broke off abruptly, and crossing the room did something totally unnecessary to the window in the sloping roof. For the girl who swore like a man but never cried had turned her face to the hollow of her arm and was trying to smother the cruel, stabbing sobs that were all she could utter of thanks.

"So bad as that?" said Mrs. Seymour to herself. "I wonder what would have happened next if I had *not* come!"

She came back to the bedside to find Vervain swallowing gulps of cold water, and ashamed to look at her. "It's all right," she said, in that pathetically hoarse voice. "But would you tell me—what it is?"

"A secretaryship to an old lady who has undertaken to administer several charities and finds it too much for her. She is giving them up in another six months, but she could not get a satisfactory substitute, and in the meantime she must have help. You will get two guineas a week and they will feed you well."

"Are they friends of yours?"

"Mrs. Coppleston is my aunt—that will prove to you that she is quite an elderly lady!" said Mrs. Seymour with quiet humour. "They have a big house in the Boltons, where you will do your work, and they are kindness itself."

"How soon can I go to her?"

Mrs. Seymour looked at her shrewdly. "As soon as you are fit to do so. Is it a very pressing case, my dear?"

"I have about ten shillings left when I have paid up," said Vervain simply.

"I think you had better come and stay with me for a week or so, as soon as the doctor will let you get up. That will suit you better than lending you money, will it not?"

"Much better. You always understand, Mrs. Seymour!"

"Not always," said Anne Seymour to herself as she went down those many stairs that had seemed as the steep path to Heaven. "For I do not understand why that girl has been riding for a fall for the past year. There is something very dreadful in her face. It looks as if the youth had gone out of it entirely. Perhaps Aunt Anstice will understand."

CHAPTER XII

Magdalen at Michael's gate
Tirléd at the pin;
On Joseph's thorn sang the blackbird,
"Let her in! Let her in!"

"Hast thou seen the wounds?" said Michael.
"Knowest thou thy sin?"
"It is evening, evening," sang the blackbird,
"Let her in! Let her in!"

—*Henry Kingsley.*

MISS CHALMONT!" said the parlourmaid,
at the door.

Tea was laid in the drawing-room on a small table near the fire, and the old silver flashed with the fire-light on one side, and the Spring sunshine coming in through the windows on the other. For the room faced south-west, and across its generous spaces Vervain saw long windows opening on to a balcony, and the young green of the trees in the gardens beyond. She saw also an old lady in a rather full black gown of something that was certainly silk but did not rustle, with most beautiful white lace on her head and round her shoulders, who was coming to meet and greet her. She was quite an old lady, and not merely elderly, for her soft hair was more silver than grey, and her face looked like a withered white rose, soft and crumpled, and suggestive of dried fragrance.

On her side the old lady saw a thin girl in shabby blue serge, carrying a business-like despatch case, and

with a face which she could only describe as starved—starved of mental things as well as physical, and lit up by large eyes that were unnaturally anxious and keen.

Both women paused involuntarily with an almost comical dismay, and looked at each other in silent doubt even while their lips were uttering conventional common-places.

“How do you do, Miss Chalmont?” said Mrs. Coppleston as they shook hands. “My niece ought to have been here to make us known to each other; but she said that she thought we had better discuss our business and get everything settled first.”

“I brought my references with me. But the Colonial Women’s League would give me a personal recommendation,” Vervain said at once. “Mrs. Seymour can, of course, speak for my work; but the Honorary Secretary, Mrs. Ponsonby, is quite ready to do so also.”

Mrs. Coppleston looked on a little helplessly as the girl opened her despatch case and handed certain letters and certificates to her presumable employer. These were all in order—the proofs that Vervain Chalmont had passed exams. in typing, shorthand, book-keeping, etc., and that she was highly recommended by the Committee of the Women’s Colonial League for her five years’ work with them. There was something almost hard and too composed in the girl’s manner, and the desperate anxiety in her young heart did not betray itself.

“I think these are all very satisfactory,” said Mrs. Coppleston gently and as cheerfully as she could, when she laid the papers down. “Your qualifications entitle you to something well paid and permanent, I am sure; but my niece thought you would be satisfied to under-

take secretarial work for me for six months, at least, at the salary I am offering—two guineas a week.”

“I shall be—very glad!” said Vervain, with a little catch in her breath at last.

Mrs. Coppleston glanced at her with the first feeling of encouragement she had had. She wondered if it were possible that this very self-possessed and capable young lady could be the forlorn creature that Anne Seymour had told her about, and if her defensive manner were perhaps due to a hard battle with the world. She had quick and eager sympathies, even at sixty-eight, but they had been nearly chilled into dismay in those first few moments of introduction.

“Then there is nothing really that we need discuss further, except the outlines of the work and the hours you will spend here,” she said with secret relief. “Suppose we have some tea, and we can talk it out over that.”

She led the way to the tea-table, quite unaware that she had left her new secretary gasping at the brevity of the engagement. Vervain was prepared for a cross-examination, at least, questions as to whether she could undertake this, that, and the other, and a tendency to put extra duties upon her which she would have to check from the first. Though she had only held one situation with the C.W.L. she had learned by experience that not to define your limits with your employers was to lay yourself open to endless encroachment on your time and good-nature; and her friends had shown her the seamy side of office life still more. But here was Mrs. Coppleston pouring out fine-flavoured China tea from a Georgian tea-pot, and urging honey-cakes upon her as the accompaniment to a vague outline of work

which it would be obviously easy to shirk—and equally dishonourable, said that fine something at the root of her nature.

“I don’t know what you will think of my Charities, they are so dreadfully badly organised,” said Mrs. Coppleston confidentially. “To tell the truth I hardly know what to think of them myself, and I shall be very glad to hand them over to somebody who is younger and fitter to dispense them when I can find a willing victim. One is merely a grant in aid from a great City Company for City children’s holidays, and that I really hope to amalgamate with the Fresh Air Fund if I can manage to make these old magnates in the City hear reason. But they are very solemn about it, as they like to keep their charities quite distinct to themselves. The other work is in connection with a bequest left some two hundred years ago by an ancestor of mine to benefit ‘Certain Poor Ladyes,’ and the difficulty lies in finding the worthiest objects of the charity.”

While she talked Vervain’s trained observant eyes were taking stock of her surroundings with a kind of ludicrous dismay. She had thought Mrs. Seymour’s flat both large and luxurious, but this great house in the Boltons was like a palace to a cottage in comparison of size. The drawing-room ran from front to back of the building, the narrower room being in the front and divided from the main portion by an archway. It was very easily furnished in old-fashioned silk rep of a blue that had faded harmoniously, and its great windows with their vista of balcony and flowers and green trees made it seem like a country house. There had been a sense of order and repose in the place the minute she had

entered it, and though there were no men-servants the female staff were obviously well-trained and of long service. It was so utterly different to any life she had known, and particularly to the office routine, that it gave Vervain a horrible feeling of having lost her bearings.

"I shall never get on with these people," she thought rapidly, while she listened to Mrs. Coppleston with serious eyes. "They will dislike me, and I shall jar on them at every point. It is a *companion* that this old lady wants, though she doesn't know it—someone who will trot after her and see that she does not wear herself out over her Charities, rather than do the work for her. They will feel that I am an alien, and I shall be stifled in all this comfort."

There came a little fierce flicker into the eyes that seemed to be following Mrs. Coppleston so quietly, just the flame of a resentment that she was outside the pale and had never led a sheltered life. If Ted had ended the holiday in Widgery Church, as Nolly had ended his own excursion into Nature in the City edifice, she might have grown used by now to a man's breadth between her and the world. But Ted had gone back to British Moldivia carrying her future with him as well as her past, and making all marriage distasteful and unlikely. It must be remembered that Vervain had just passed through a year of the greatest stress she had ever experienced, and had ended with a sharp attack of influenza. Mind and body both cried out for rest, and while she thankfully accepted Mrs. Coppleston's secretaryship as a "soft job," she was aware of the effort

that awaited her at the end of the six months when she must try for a harder and more permanent post.

She left almost as soon as Mrs. Seymour arrived, having settled to take up her new duties the following Monday at half past ten.

"I am afraid it is no use asking you to come earlier, as we are rather late over our breakfast!" said Mrs. Coppleston apologetically.

"A very good thing too, for Miss Chalmont as well as for you," put in Mrs. Seymour decidedly. "I forbid you to come down five minutes earlier, Aunt Anstice, under pain of my severe displeasure. And half past eight is quite early enough for Miss Chalmont, even if she dawdles over her breakfast conscientiously!"

Vervain was smiling as she left the great room, as much with a sense of safety for the next six months as any amusement. She had not smiled when she entered—nor did Mrs. Coppleston feel altogether inclined to smile as she turned to her niece when they were alone.

"Oh Anne! I never saw anyone so like a stray cat. Don't you know the suspicion in the poor thing's eyes even when you put food down for it? I could not think what it was she reminded me of until I saw exactly the same expression in her face!"

"And yet you will end by liking her," said Anne Seymour.

* * * * *

The Certain Poor Ladyes were by no means a sine-cure. Vervain found that her clerical work was comparatively light for both Charities, but the labour of tracing out deserving cases and verifying facts without tearing self-respect to shreds, took her further afield

than seeing Colonial women to and from boats and trains. She worked with the Charity Organisation Society at times, respecting their thoroughness and revolting from their individual methods as most people do who are not trained in their school. She worked through the clergy of parishes, and even through detective agencies, and she found heart-breaking contrasts of a poverty which it seemed cruel to probe, and a deceitful profession that made her cynical of all human nature. She went about her work with a conscientious thoroughness that was inherent in her; but with a growing championship of her employer also which made her grimly determined that Mrs. Coppleston at least should not be imposed upon.

In her inmost heart she began to build two shrines, and to set the images of her old lady and gentleman in the Boltons therein. For she had met Mr. Coppleston, and found him the complement of his wife—a courtly gentleman five years older than his lady, very gently humorous, devoted to books, and so much a master of courtesy that she was never aware of his manners.

"Mr. Coppleston could never be rude," she said seriously to Mrs. Seymour. "But then no one could possibly be rude to him. I think they would wither up and die if they even thought of such a thing!"

She was not given to idealising individuals, whatever she might do for a Cause; she saw too hardly and too clearly for that. But she was capable of a passionate devotion, and a fierce little fashion of protection, both of which she had begun to lavish on her Household Saints. The end of her temporary engagement began to be a sore place in her heart, much more so than had the end of her holiday with Ted Edgerton, though she

felt that later, and she tortured herself with keeping it steadily before her lest it should have to be faced suddenly.

"The little good bits in my life are always temporary," she impressed on herself. "It is no use crying out afterwards—in each case I have gone into it knowing that it must end."

She accustomed herself to say to Mrs. Seymour, "When Mrs. Coppleston finds a substitute to take over her Charities I think she will find everything in order," or "I think Mrs. Coppleston is quite right to give up the work. It is too much for her, even though I do as much as I can."

"Are you anxious to wind it all up, yourself?" said Anne Seymour calmly.

"I? No, I don't think so," said Vervain, with a guard of indifference. "No—I shall be sorry!" she added half fiercely.

Mrs. Seymour looked at her thoughtfully. She had come in to her aunt's drawing-room to find a good many people there, all anxious to talk to their hostess. Anne had often deprecated these chance visitors being all admitted on one afternoon, as very exhausting to the old lady, who had always been delicate and apt to over-exert herself; but to-day Vervain Chalmont had been in command of the tea-table and Mrs. Coppleston was placidly enjoying herself amongst one group or another, without her hospitality being on her mind.

"I think Aunt Anstice will miss you a good deal!" was the only remark she made, but Vervain's face flushed as if she listened to the praise of a lover.

"What are you going to do about Miss Chalmont?"

Anne asked her aunt at the end of six months. The dispensing of the charities was still in Mrs. Coppleston's hands, and no one had suggested an alteration of the present arrangement.

"Oh my dear Anne, I wanted to speak to you about her. I have had it on my mind for a great while, and so has Hugh. We can't bear her having to turn out of her room these cold mornings and come all this way, and then the going back at night. Do you think she would object to a different arrangement?"

"I think you ought to give her a month's notice, any way."

"A month's notice?" said Mrs. Coppleston, gently puzzled. "But she can give up her room at the end of a week—she told me so."

"I thought you meant that you wanted to get rid of her."

Mrs. Coppleston's white-rose-leaf face looked absolutely shocked. She had eyes which were originally hazel and had faded a little so that they were almost mouse-coloured; but they were quite bright and angry as she looked at her favourite niece.

"*Get rid of her!*" she repeated. "What has the poor child done that we should want to get rid of her? Hugh and I thought it would be so much nicer if she came and lived in the house. I am sure she does not have proper breakfasts. But of course she may like the independence of her own room—I daresay I should, myself."

"I don't fancy that would stand in the way. Only, if she gives up her room you ought to make her engage-

ment with you a permanent one. It would be unfair to turn her adrift in another month or so."

"But of course we are keeping her permanently!" said Mrs. Coppleston, quite ruffled. "Do you suppose that I want to lose my little stray cat now that she has grown used to us? It would be a dreadful thing to think that that look might come back into her face. I have not seen it lately, thank God!"

"No." Anne Seymour considered. "I have not seen it lately, either. She is altering a good deal, and it would be interesting to see how she developed if she stayed on with you. Have you had any trouble with her about the Suffrage?"

"My dear, why should we? I am a Suffragette myself, you know, through sympathy with the woman's movement, and I find it most interesting hearing about their meetings and speeches. She had a friend to lunch here with her one day, and they went together to some hall—such a nice girl! It made Hugh quite young. We were all laughing through luncheon."

"She still goes to meetings, then?"

"Of course. We always arrange for her to get away on those days."

"And she has never done anything silly—fought the police or broken windows?"

"Not that I know of," said Mrs. Coppleston, quite undisturbed and looking mildly interested. "I feel sure she would have told us if she got into trouble."

Anne suddenly laughed. "Aunt Anstice, you must have had wonderful hands for a horse's mouth!" was her only comment.

Vervain had less reason than even Mrs. Seymour

knew to hesitate at leaving the combined room in Tachbrook Street. Netta had gone to a house of her own three months ago, Nolly having got his rise in salary at last, so that she had no friend in the high dark lodging-house. Worse still, Netta's room had been taken by a man of whom Vervain knew nothing, until one night there was a hesitating knock on her door.

"Who's there?" she asked sharply, for she was just ready to get into bed and she could think of nothing less than fire that should bring her landlady to her room.

A man's voice, low and a little stealthy, asked her if she could lend him matches. He had none, and wanted to light a candle.

Vervain, standing in her nightdress by the bed, felt her limbs grow cold and rigid, and calculated the strength of the door between her and unknown evil, here at the top of the tall dark house.

"*Habe nicht!*" she said curtly, for something in the voice had betrayed its origin.

A hand tried the door, and she thought he put his shoulder against it; but it was solidly built, and after a minute she heard him going slowly downstairs again. But she did not sleep much that night, and for ever after as she passed his door she braced her nerves and felt her muscles tighten like steel. Probably the foreigner had been drunk, for he did not come to her door again; but when Mrs. Coppleston suggested her taking up her quarters in the Boltons she accepted with an inward relief she never acknowledged. Nor were her Household Saints troubled with the ugly incident of that dark night in a dark house, to make them sadder for the lives of girls who worked for their living.

The furniture of the room was easily disposed of, as Netta was glad to give it warehouse room. Vervain saw it moved to Acton where her friends had gone to live, and spent the day with Netta which she had not done for some time. The baby had been born in February, and Mrs Bate was about again, doing two-thirds of the work of the little house and assisted only by a very immature servant who could hardly be trusted to go out with the perambulator. Poor Netta! she had not gone back to her work in the City, but it seemed she was no less of a drudge in her own home to which she had so looked forward as a release. Coming straight from the great rooms in the Boltons, the efficient servants, and the quiet comfort and order of the place, the contrast in Netta's surroundings struck Vervain with more of a shock than she would have received if she had been spending her life between the combined room and the office of the C.W.L.

"Netta, is married life a success?" she said bluntly, as they sat at tea that afternoon with the baby in its basket between them. Vervain had got the tea, while the young mother attended to the thousand and one things that seemed necessary for a young infant. The servant had her afternoon off, and Nolly had not yet come down from the City. It struck Vervain that Netta must never get an afternoon off at this rate.

"It depends—" said Netta, in answer to that pertinent question. She turned her face away, and looked at her child with an inscrutable expression that her friend translated as fear for its future.

"Everything seems to be a question of money," she said somewhat cynically. "Even the babies that so few

people ought to afford! Would you rather not have had her?"

"Not in that way!" said Netta quickly.

"What way?" Vervain's heart began to beat ominously. "You don't mean because of the—hurry? But it's all right now!"

"It can never be quite all right," said Netta restlessly. "We shall always remember that she came—too soon. Sometimes when I meet my husband's eyes I think of it—and I wonder if he looks upon me quite as he would a woman who was not his wife until the ring was on her finger. You were right, Vervain—it did not matter to you. But I was made of different stuff. I ought not to have attempted it."

The younger girl's fine lips curled with an exceeding bitter smile, and that look came back to her face that reminded Mrs. Coppleston of a stray cat—the bright anxious expression that is always on the look out for chances, that wonders where the next meal is to come from, that reads the faces of passers-by pitifully, and expects a cruelty rather than a kindness.

"It was all right for me—because I did not have a child?" she said rather slowly.

"Yes—you escaped the consequences. And then, you did not care!"

"If a thing matters, it matters to you always, consequences or no," said Vervain with conviction. "I am sorry, Netta. I thought it was the sort of thing one could live down, whatever happened if one set one's will upon it. But it seems like Nemesis, always dogging your steps."

A sense of discouragement, almost of fear, was on her

as she went home to the Boltons for the first time. It was really her home now, and it had almost seemed as if with the giving up of her vagrant life in rooms she was putting the past behind her and gaining the shelter and guardianship that belonged of right to girls with homes. Netta was safely married, and her folly had done her no obvious harm after all, so that Vervain's responsibility was wiped out of the book of Fate. She had been almost inclined to say that the consequences of her own actions depended on her own will, as she had aforetime; but the afternoon's experience struck her again in a vulnerable place.

"I wouldn't have minded half so much if the consequences had come on me!" she thought bitterly. "Even if I had had to pay for it by having a child. It was my own risk, and my own punishment. But Netta was my friend, and I have made her suffer it seems, as well as what I went through myself. It's a crooked world."

CHAPTER XIII

"Yet, I have seen the wounds,
And I know my sin."

"She knows it well, well, well," sang the blackbird,
"Let her in! Let her in!"

"Thou bringest no offerings," said Michael.
"Nothing save sin."

And the blackbird sang, "She is sorry, sorry, sorry,
"Let her in! Let her in!"

—*Henry Kingsley.*

VERVAIN CHALMONT had lived with the Coplestons for three years when the German war broke out. The Fresh Air Fund had taken over the City Children's Holidays, but the Certain Poor Ladyes still remained in Mrs. Copleston's hands, or rather in Vervain's and for the rest she was secretary, companion, librarian, and even housekeeper to her old lady and gentleman, taking up one duty after another imperceptibly as the time went on. Both Mr. and Mrs. Copleston were now over seventy, and like most old people were liable to give their friends moments of alarm during the Winter. Vervain had nursed Mrs. Copleston during influenza and bronchitis, and had seen Mr. Copleston through a very painful attack of lumbago, fiercely resisting Mrs. Seymour's mild suggestion of a trained nurse.

"They don't like uniforms!" she said irrationally, in defense of her patients. "Mr. Copleston says it

always puts him in mind of a policeman, and Danvers and I can nurse your aunt much better than any professional because she will do as we tell her, and she won't obey a nurse."

Danvers was Mrs. Coppleston's maid, and had been so for many years. It says much for some subtle quality in Vervain Chalmont, and for her tact, that even old servants did not resent her growing influence, and that they were jealous for her rather than against her. "Our Miss Chalmont" they called her, extending their proprietary rights to her as well as to their master and mistress.

It seemed as if she had taken root in that household, and would expand and grow both mentally and physically as she had never had a chance to do before; for despite the work she did, and it was not in her nature to be idle, she had altered very much in the time that had elapsed since she left the C.W.L. Her face had lost the angle of the too-decided chin and become oval as Nature originally intended, and she was not always dead white like a flower that is grown in a cellar. She had a faint and very pretty colour, and the saddest that could be said for her eyes was that they were rather wistful. Mrs. Seymour sometimes looked at her and marvelled.

"One sees now what she ought to have been," she said thoughtfully. "What she would always have been if she had been fed and housed and dressed properly. It is a material ideal, perhaps, but it makes me rather shocked to think that there must be hundreds of girls whose best face is always undeveloped. I never knew that Vervain Chalmont was even capable of being extremely pretty. I thought she was intelligent looking,

and I knew she was attractive. But she has all that now with the right outlines as well!"

It struck her as probable that the girl would eventually marry, but it was not imminent. She was living a far more social life with a wider circle than in her office days, and meeting men and women of a different stamp; but it seemed likely that things would drift on comfortably for some years at least, and Anne Seymour breathed a sigh of relief that it should be so. Change is always hard for old people, and to find another companion or amanuensis who suited her uncle and aunt as well as Vervain Chalmont would have been a worrying task that must have devolved on her. It really seemed a Providence that in trying to do the girl a good turn—and it must be owned she had had her misgivings—she should have fitted her into the Copplestons' lives as neatly as if she had found the right pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

But the War uprooted many things that seemed immovable, and threatened the establishment of Vervain's position with her employers. At first the air-raids affected London but little, but as they increased Mrs. Seymour came to the serious conclusion that her uncle and aunt were too old to be exposed to shocks if not to danger, and that it would be better for them to take a house in the country and shut the one in the Boltons unless something imperative brought them up to London from time to time. They had been in the habit of spending some weeks in Buckinghamshire every year, as they liked the county, and knowing the neighbourhood were able to get what they wanted more easily than most people who go house-hunting. It was all arranged

rather rapidly, and at the same time Mrs. Coppleston decided to get rid once for all of the responsibility of her stewardship and to hand over the Certain Poor Ladyes to somebody who had offered to administer the charity in the nick of time.

Vervain Chalmont had never been to Buckinghamshire with them, and knew nothing of that part of England. She had always taken her holiday on her own account when her employers went away, as Mrs. Coppleston wisely thought that it would be little rest or relaxation for her to be in attendance on her and her husband, as she certainly would have been, even though she got change of air and scene. How much she missed the girl she was too unselfish to say, but she was always very thankful to get her back, to refer to and to rely on half unconsciously. She was so really an old lady that she submitted to her age, and did not look twenty years younger than she was and try to live up to it.

It had been taken for granted by the servants that Miss Chalmont would accompany their master and mistress out of town. It was taken for granted by Mrs. Seymour also, and indeed she had reasons for thinking so not connected with the girl's position. The one person who had not taken it for granted was Miss Chalmont herself. Ever since the removal was mooted she had fallen back upon the old, unsettled feeling of her first six months in the Boltons, and she had sensed that Mrs. Coppleston had something to say to her that troubled her kind mind and made her glance at her secretary almost pitifully at times.

"She does not know how to tell me that I must go—probably she is trying to find another opening for me

before she speaks," thought Vervain with that alert look coming back into her face that had been banished for three years. "I ought to help her—but I am afraid of breaking down a little and making matters worse. My dear old lady! it is cruelty to her to let her think herself unkind. I have been a fool to let myself grow into this life. It has made me soft. I am almost dependent on comfort, and good food, and service. I shall have to go back to a lodging-house again."

She looked round her pretty, airy room, and realised with blank dismay how much it had come to mean to her. It was upholstered in chintz in the Summer with rep covers for Winter, and she loved the deep easy chairs and the round old-fashioned table that held her books and work, and the really luxurious bed. There was no better room in the house than hers, both as to aspect and furnishing, though she was only a dependent. But that was exactly like her Household Saints, who showed as much, or more, consideration for their servants as they did for their guests.

A sudden memory of the homeless streets on the night she left the office for the last time, came back to Vervain to frighten her. Those blank walls that were only bricks and mortar and seemed to hold nothing inside them had impressed themselves on her mind when it was already vivid with illness, and whenever she was at all unwell she still dreamed of them. Her nightmare was that she was for ever wandering through high blocks of houses which had no entrance, and that the windows were all closed and darkened. There was a wind in the dream too, a cold wind that blew between the blocks and

chilled her however she turned from it. She used to wake shivering.

"Steady on!" said Vervain to herself, as she faced her probable dismissal. "You always knew that this might end at any time, that it did not belong to you. You had better face it."

And so it came about that instead of the employer speaking to the secretary, the secretary spoke to the employer of the thing that was in both their minds. She chose a time when they were alone, and not even Mr. Copleston was present—for why should the old gentleman share their discomfort?—and she went and sat on a low stool at Mrs. Copleston's side under pretence of holding the wool for her to wind for her knitting.

"I've been thinking about your leaving London, dear lady," she said almost caressingly. "It will be a great uprooting for you——"

"Not so great as if we were going to a strange place," said Mrs. Copleston with something that might be eagerness or nervousness or both in her voice. "We know the Rosary quite well, you see. We have had it furnished once or twice in the Summer. It is a very pretty house, and a lovely garden!" She spoke pleadingly, as if in excuse for their desertion of the Boltons.

"Yes, I know. But it is a smaller house than this, isn't it?"

"A little smaller. Yes. This is almost too large for us, you know."

"Not so many bedrooms?"

"Oh, no—but quite enough."

"You won't take all the servants with you surely!"

"We are leaving Mrs. Thrupp here, because she wants

to stay on account of her daughter being in London. She will act as caretaker, and have everything ready in case we want to come up at any time. The kitchen-maid will do the cooking. Thrupp has trained her."

"I think——" There threatened to be a knot in the winding, and Vervain bent her soft dark head over the wool—"that there must be one or two gaps in the household, mustn't there? You won't want quite so many servants, or—a secretary?"

Her face was quite under control after all. She looked up with a smile that was a little rueful but not tremulous.

"I have been so wanting to speak to you about it!" said Mrs. Coppleston with obvious relief. "You are a good girl to give me an opening, Vervain! Hugh and I have been talking it over for some time, and we think there ought to be a new arrangement——"

"Yes, I thought you had. You have been trying to get something else for me, I suppose. That was like you. But I would rather strike out for myself again—it is better for me, dear lady."

"What are you talking about?" said Mrs. Coppleston, with almost the same indignation she had shown when Mrs. Seymour had told her she ought to give Vervain a month's notice three years since. "You don't understand, my child. You don't want to *leave* us, do you?"

She looked down with those dimly bright eyes into the sober young face at her knee, and then laid her fine wrinkled hand over the steady fingers holding the skein of wool. "Vervain! don't look like that—not that look!" she said almost sharply.

"What do you mean?" The face was bewildered now even through its old suspicion.

"You used to look like a little stray cat—I told Anne so when you first came to me. I hoped never to see that expression on your face again, and it has come back. Oh, my dear, if I had had a daughter and I could have imagined that look on her face, I think it would have broken my heart! What could the world have done to you to bring it there?"

She dropped the wool, for she was an impulsive old lady still, and took the dark sealskin-coloured head in her hands, looking down at Vervain with wet eyes and a little laugh on her lips. "Oh, you foolish child!" she said. "Did you think that Hugh and I were going to 'find you another situation,' like Ruth the housemaid?"

"I thought you did not want a secretary now that you have got rid of the Charities, and Mr. Copleston will be away from his books."

"We don't!"

Mrs. Copleston was really laughing now, pleased with her own mischief and the doubt struggling with hope in the downcast face.

"But we want a godchild!" she said, with a sudden, awful gentleness to Vervain's ears. "It has been the great blank in our lives, dear, that we had no children, and though Anne is like a daughter to us she has many ties, more particularly her husband's people since his death, as you know. We have often thought of adopting some miserable little sinner who wanted a home, and would bear with two tiresome old people for the sake of it; but we never found the right one to fill the niche until I engaged a secretary!"

Vervain Chalmont drew away slowly, and put her hands over her eyes as if to shield them. Mrs. Coppleston went on speaking softly and tenderly, almost merrily, to allow her time to get over the first rush of her feelings; but she could not see the tortured face or follow that backward glance in the girl's mind. They wanted to adopt her, her Household Saints, to draw her into the warm safe circle of their home and their gracious, clean outlook upon life; and they looked upon her as quite as eligible for the position as any girl of their own class whose upbringing and experiences they knew and might read like an open book. But they would not wish it if they knew of that fortnight in Devon that lay beyond and before their knowledge of her, and that she had taken a "holiday husband" for the idle Spring days of her youth. And she must tell them this, and admit the hideous ghost that was always to haunt her, it seemed—the ghost of a bearded man with faintly tragic eyes who had gone off scot free to the other side of the world, and need never confess to any like disability, since no one would blame him even if they knew . . .

"We want to make you our godchild in very truth," Mrs. Coppleston was saying. "You know you told me that you had never been baptised, and Hugh and I set a very great and sacred value on that sealing of a child to God, though I know that it means little to you, you poor little heathen! We will be your sponsors, and give you our name as well as your own, and then you will really belong to us. Do you think you can face the ordeal of adult baptism for our sakes, Vervie?"

A dull surprise passed through Vervain's brain at the question. Baptism or christening meant nothing to her, as Mrs. Coppleston had said. She had been taught in her father's tenets, and the thin veneer of religion that was compulsory in the Charitable School had made less impression on her than vulgar fractions. But it seemed a simple matter to her to go through the ceremony if it pleased Mr. and Mrs. Coppleston. What if she did feel slightly ridiculous? She would have braved total immersion or anything that appeared foolish and unnecessary to herself if they had wished it. The Gods of Chance whom she had worshipped had played her a sorry trick in bringing this new devotion into her life, this opening up of new possibilities, when she was already weighted with the penalty of her own folly. In the curt slang of her own vernacular it was "up to her" to witness against herself and to be her own executioner.

"You cannot do this thing!" she said in a rough voice that did not seem her own. "I am not what you think I am—I have not been straight." There was a pause while she panted with her own despair and hurt love. "It was only once!" she said in a poor little excuse that eased her own heart at least.

"Tell me!" said Mrs. Coppleston at last, very gently.

"I can't. He went away. I have never seen him since. I never shall."

"Do you want to, Vervain?"

"No!"

"When was this?"

"Before I knew you."

Mrs. Coppleston drew a difficult breath, like a sigh.

"You have not been 'crooked,' as you may call it, since?" she said.

"Never—oh, how could I? You were good to me—and it would have hurt you. I was only a little fool, but it seemed to matter to no one but myself, at the time. And I can't ever get rid of what I've done."

"No, we can't get rid of what we've done," said Mrs. Coppleston quietly. "But since it is done, we can put it behind us. This makes no difference to my husband or myself, Vervain. We have even discussed the possibility. If you give us your promise to put the past behind you, and to live as our god-daughter should in the future—to 'go straight' as you put it—we shall be content. And this subject need never be mentioned between us again."

The girl looked at her as if half scared, half dazed, "I need not promise you that, though I will, because I have promised myself," she said. "Mrs. Coppleston, are you *sure*? Won't you think it over again now that I have told you?"

"Quite sure, Vervie—all the surer because you *have* told us. If you had not, there might have been a doubt between us. As things are, there cannot be."

"No, there is nothing more," said Vervain slowly. "At least, you know all the rest of my life. But I am afraid I shall disappoint you!"

"You can't disappoint us, because we don't ask you for anything but love, and that works all the miracles," said Mrs. Coppleston serenely, and she really meant what she said. "We will not even ask you to be baptised until you feel that you wish it yourself. You are

our dear god-daughter anyhow, and I often think it is the most beautiful name of all. Now take that miserable stray-cat look off your face for ever, my child, and let us tell Hugh that it is settled, and we are all one family."

CHAPTER XIV

"The moon came down the shining stair
Of clouds that fleck the Summer sky,
She kissed thee, saying 'Child, be fair,
And madden men's hearts, even as I.
Thou shalt love all things strange and sweet
That love me and are known of me,—
The lover thou shalt never meet,
The land where thou shalt never be!'"

—*Andrew Lang.*

I SUPPOSE that Buckinghamshire is more unspoiled than any other of the Home Counties because it has been the playground of rich men. Owing to Lord Rothschild's staghounds and the Whaddon Chase Foxhounds, the hunting was not only accessible from London, but was sufficiently expensive to keep the ruck at bay; and the train service, though not overlong, was devious enough to discourage trippers. Therefore, the county has remained marvellously rural though so near a neighbour to London, and it is only at Chalfont Road and Chessham that its disgusted votaries pronounce it spoiled.

The Copplestons' house was a mile or so out of Winslow on the Whitchurch side. Since the War, Bletchley had become unpleasantly martial, a din of drums and training camps; but save for a monthly visitation from the Cyclists' Corps Winslow escaped the inundation of khaki, and even the billeting was intermittent. The cyclists buzzed into the Square and squatted there,

making the place hum for a fatiguing day and night, and departing in clouds of dust and the creaking of accoutrements, while the scandalised old houses looked on as if on Cromwell's Ironsides, and with much the same air of disapproval. The soldiers gone, they subsided again to their slumberous peace in the sunshine, and local gossip reverted to the restricted liquor trade and the price of forage.

Miss Copleston drove her pony cart into Winslow one June morning about a year after her godparents had left London and taken up their residence at the Rosary. She had the gardener's boy in attendance on her to hold the pony, and she stopped at the butcher's to buy some scraps of raw meat, the ration order being still in the far distance. She explained that she wanted the meat for an ailing cat, and left a further order with the butcher for more scraps in the course of a day or so. In the middle of the Square a woman was using the town pump vigorously, and a boy was waiting his turn when she should have filled her bucket, for Winslow is still innocent of a system of water-pipes though it boasts a gas connection. Even the hunting-boxes and "detached residences" have their pumps, labor-saving contrivances of the newest pattern placed *inside* the houses, but pumps for all that; and there is hardly a property without its well for the garden.

The drawers of water looked at the Copleston pony-cart, and Vervain looked back at them, reflecting on the elementary system of water-power that obtained so near to London, and marvelling that it should have survived. She was getting used to it now, but when she had first come she had thought Buckinghamshire a sin-

gularly waterless land, as indeed it is. Her holidays before and after the fateful fortnight in Devonshire had been spent at the sea, mostly on the East coast, and she reverted to Devonshire unconsciously as her urban standard. That land of deep coombes and running streams, where there was a freshet by every roadside, seemed the exact opposite of the small green pastures of Buckinghamshire, the level roads, the easy slope of some line of hills that was all that broke the horizon. Even the herbage by the roadside and the hedges were different. A rich county, a quaint county, too, with its women making lace at the cottage doors and its black and white timber houses; but as different from Devonshire as chalk from cheese. Despite its unspoiled rusticity, "Bucks" always seemed the conventional county to Vervain, carefully nursed and petted by its patrons, and allowed no more liberty than the child of aristocrats in a nursery. But wild Devon with its unploughed Moor came of more gipsy origin. Perhaps it was her unsanctioned sojourn there compared with the life she lived with her godparents that coloured her impressions.

Miss Coppleston turned round the draper's shop at the corner of the Square and drove away past the church, on her way to Winslow Station. She was, as it chanced, going to meet Omar Khyyam who was being sent down to the Rosary for change of air since he had not been well. Mrs. Seymour was to have come with him, but had wired at the last minute to say that she was detained in town (Vervain suspected war-work and committees) and that the cat would travel in a basket in charge of the guard. The alteration of plans fretted Miss Coppleston a little, as much on the in-

valid's account as on Mrs. Seymour's, though Anne's absence was a blank disappointment. He would have to change at Bletchley, and would be handed about from one to another. Suppose he were left behind, ailing, frightened, and unfed! The thought was dreadful.

"I ought to have gone to Bletchley and saved him the extra journey," thought Vervain restlessly, as she pulled up at the station. "But Anne had addressed him here, and they might have refused to give me the hamper. Well, if he doesn't come I shall telephone to the Saints and simply drive on to Bletchley and see." She walked up and down the arrival platform with an impatience that prevented her sitting down or looking at the bookstall. Poor Omar!—how unfortunate that Anne could not come. It was, of course, on the cat's account that she had thoughtfully stayed to buy the raw meat, for she knew something of dieting feline convalescents. Raw meat chopped fine, and scalded milk—not new, though they had their own cows. "He will love the garden!" thought Vervain.

There were not many passengers on the arrival platform. One or two local people knew her by sight, and she said good morning to them, but there was no one to whom she wanted to talk. The only other person of her own class was a thick-set man in khaki, who was a stranger to her, and was followed by a restless white terrier who poked his nose into everything and was as frequently behind the station as in it. Vervain noted absently that he was a Sealyham, but she was more arrested by the dog's master for some reason that she could not explain even to herself. He looked about fifty, and he was smart even in his khaki, which wrinkles on

most men as naturally as the hide on a rhinoceros. It was his clothes that approved him in Vervain's eyes, and claimed her passing attention. For the rest her cursory glance merely noted that he was a fair type, too sandy to be distinctly grey, but, as she suspected, growing thin at the temples. And his gay blue eyes were roving over the station for any object of distraction, and very naturally settling on herself. She did not mind, since he had nothing else at which to look. But she found him too confident, too full of himself—" 'I've just eaten the canary!' sort of look," she designated it in her own mind.

He gave her, also, a faint feeling of well-being that seemed to emanate from herself rather than from him, like the glow of physical comfort. As he was a stranger to her she put it down to a certain atmosphere of prosperity about him, as of a man well-established socially as well as in his own estimation. It is a comfortable thing to be Somebody even in a locality, and warms one like a good fire. Yes, that must be it undoubtedly, and perhaps that was why she felt she wanted to go on looking at him, more covertly, but no less persistently, than he at her.

Then the train came in, and distracted her attention. She found the guard's carriage, but could not find the guard, and there was no hamper in his van. With her heart beating in her throat—for she loved Omar, and he was growing old—she ran down the length of the train and arrived at the luggage van to find the Sealyham terrier prancing round the hamper she was seeking and uttering what was no doubt a menace to the poor prisoner inside who was unable to escape and saw

death in those grinning teeth just outside his cage.

The owner of the dog was standing by the van also, talking to the porter in a crisp tone of authority about a parcel that had come through from Bletchley, when he was astounded by a low, furious voice at his side.

"Call off your dog!" it said with a thrill of anger in it that was so unmistakable that his words to the porter were checked as quickly as if she had struck him.

He swung round instantly to see the girl in blue serge, whom he had been admiring, looking at him with murderous eyes. He felt instinctively that if she could she would have killed him and his dog together—no, the next instant he felt equally sure that she would have spared the dog. She had lifted a heavy hamper from the ground high in her arms over the head of the Sealyham who was jumping on her and barking in an excitement half fierce and half friendly. Her arms were cumbered with the basket, but she did not kick at the dog as nine people out of ten would have done. It was the soldier himself who called the dog sharply to order, and, the animal not instantly obeying him, caught it a cuff on the ear that sent it whimpering to heel, perfectly aware that it had been behaving badly throughout. The girl, however, was not in the least appeased.

"If you can't control your dog you are not fit to have one!" she said, and her voice was two notes lower than its usual pitch with curbed rage. "You have no more right to allow him to run loose like that, in a station, or to annoy the public, than any labouring man. *They* would be censured quickly enough!"

"I am really very sorry——"

"It is no use being sorry," said the girl with de-

liberate rudeness—she meant to be rude, and he knew it —“You had better have him on a lead next time. Apologies are cheap after the mischief has been done through your own carelessness!”

“If she had been a man she would have said ‘your own damned carelessness.’ She wanted to say it as it was,” he thought, watching the great pupils of her eyes dilate and blot out the iris. They were curiously translucent eyes that were apt to take a reflection of what she wore, so that they might be faintly brown, or green, or blue. Just now he thought they were more violet than anything else.

“The dog has done you no harm,” he began, sufficiently nettled to speak shortly in his turn. But the girl had not waited for his retort. She had gone down the platform at a pace little short of a run, her huge hamper still in her arms, and out at the entrance to the Winslow Road. He noted the perfect poise of her body on her neat little feet with approval even in the midst of his resentment. How light she was! she almost flew, and yet she never jarred the big hamper.

“Who is that lady?” he said rather dryly to the porter, who was looking as dismayed as if Vervain’s tirade had been levelled at himself.

“Miss Coppleston, sir. They’re new people—only bin ’ere for a year or so.” He spoke resentfully, as to somebody who was by no means new in the county.

“Mr. Coppleston who used to rent the Rosary?”

“Yes, sir. He’ve taken it for a term now—come away from London on account of the raids, I ’ear. That young lady is his niece or grand-daughter or some relation.”

"I see. Well, send those things on to the Timber House as soon as you can. Come along Get—you've made enough trouble for one day!" He hooked his cane into the Sealyham's collar and walked off down the platform, leaving the porter with a dawning grin of reminiscence.

"I never 'ear the Colonel spoke to like that young lady spoke to 'im before!" he said to himself. "She has got a cheek! Fair temper she was in, too."

Vervain had deposited the hamper at the bottom of the little governess cart where it would be out of the light and noise. Her mouth was set in a red line, and her breath still came unevenly. But she remembered to drive steadily through Winslow and control the pony's desire to get back to his stable, and the gardener's boy only thought admiringly that Miss Coppleston was a capital whip and never guessed at the storm still surging in her veins. It had been partly fear that had made her so angry—fear for the cat, and sympathy for his predicament. She was not really imaginative though she was observant; but something in her own life had helped her to realise what it would be like to be helplessly caged and to face the grinning teeth of destiny. A fair fight and no favour she would never shirk; but to have your hands tied——!

Not until she had carried the hamper up to her own room and released the traveller, did she dream of going to her godparents and telling them of her adventure. Omar was trembling and bewildered, and frightened at the strange place. It seemed cruel to have brought him down here to recover, and to treat him like this! She shredded the raw meat, lifted him on to her lap, and

sat there for some time coaxing him to eat—a very gentle little girl, who was hardly recognisable as the virago of the railway station. When at last the cat had been coaxed into eating and drinking, she put him into the basket carefully prepared for his comfort and had the satisfaction of seeing him snuggle down to forget his horrible experience in sleep. Then, and not till then, she had time to take off her hat and coat and make herself presentable for luncheon.

She was considerably late, but there were no visitors present, and Mr. and Mrs. Coppleston had expected that she might be kept waiting at the station. They looked up at her with an indulgent fondness as she entered that had a more soothing effect on her late disturbance than anything they could have said.

"We did not wait, Vervie—luncheon is a movable feast," said Mrs. Coppleston easily.

"Well, did you find the important passenger?" said her godfather with a twinkle in his kindly eyes. "Where is he, by the way?"

"I left him dozing in my room, after I had fed him," said Vervain. "Poor dear! he had a nasty jar. A brute of a man, with a sporting terrier, got to the luggage van before I did—for I thought Omar was with the guard—and the dog was yelping with excitement all round the hamper. *He* knew what was inside!"

"Oh, poor Omar!" said Mrs. Coppleston sympathetically. "Was he very frightened?"

"Horribly, I should think—I should have been, in his place. And the fool who owned the dog was not looking after it at all."

"What a shame!"

"You went for the fool—I mean the owner—of course?" said Mr. Coppleston with quiet enjoyment of the situation.

"Yes, I did. I was towering. I stood and abused him until he would have turned to bay in a minute, and then I left him before he got the satisfaction! But I don't think he'll leave his terrier loose in the station again in a hurry."

"What sort of a man was he? A gentleman?"

"He was in khaki. And from the porter's manner I think he was someone of importance. But I didn't care. I was like *that* about it!"

"I wonder who it could have been!" said Mrs. Coppleston interestedly—she would have been interested if Vervain had made acquaintance with the sweep. "One of the Chalmonts, Hugh?"

"No—they are all at the Front."

"But they might be home on leave!"

"I think we should have heard of it. What was he like, Vervain?"

Vervain had grown used to references to her father's family, and hardly noticed the name when it arose in conversation as it frequently did, the Wedderburn Chalmonts being big landowners near by. But somehow she did not think that the man in khaki had been one of her cousins, though it was possible. He had no look of her father, anyway.

"A big man—thick-set and square-shouldered," she said briefly. "Fair—sandyish—turning gray—smart little moustache, and like the hero of 'Nell Cook'——"

"He had a merry eye!"

"Colonel Swayne!" said Mrs 'Coppleston involuntarily, and her husband laughed.

"Poor George! that gives him away. And Vervie's description is accurate. I expect it was Colonel Swayne of the Timber House, Vervie—he was invalided home six months ago, and has been doing recruiting work since or training men, I forget which. I heard the other day that he was coming back for a time."

"Does he own the Timber House?" said Vervain with new interest. "It's my favourite house in all this neighbourhood, and I always wanted to go inside it. I am sorry now that I was quite so poisonous! I shall never be allowed there."

"It's a fine place," said Mr. Coppleston teasingly. "Genuine 15th Century. You have missed an antiquarian treat, Vervie—of course, we should not dare to take you with us when we go over to see Colonel Swayne. He would dig himself in and refuse to parley!"

"I don't thing George Swayne would refuse to parley about anything in a petticoat!" said Mrs. Coppleston with unexpected wickedness. "He has been the eligible bachelor here for fifteen years, since his elder brother died, and he has flirted with every single woman within motoring distance."

"Godmother, I am ashamed of you! You are well within the radius."

"She was," said Mr. Coppleston, delighted. "George told her that she had the loveliest rings he ever saw on the most delightful hands. And I have reason to believe that he came to tea and held one of the said hands when I was out."

"Compliments to the old are like courtesy titles—they

carry no real privilege," said Mrs. Coppleston. "It is very likely that he did hold my hand, and still more likely that he held the parlourmaid's when she let him out!"

"I thought he looked that way," said Vervain sagely, with a retrospective glance at the gay blue eyes and the Colonel's debonair smile. "But you know, Godmother, you and I would have been just the same if we had been men!"

"My dear," said Mrs. Coppleston with conviction, "I should have been the very devil!"

Vervain spent most of the afternoon in her own room, looking after Omar. He was nervous of his new surroundings, and after excursions all round the wainscot he returned to creep into her lap with his pitiful small "mew!" He had had an abscess in the ear, to which he was subject, and though it had healed it had pulled him down and made him thin. Vervain commandeered cream from the dairy and enriched his milk with it at four o'clock before she went downstairs to tea, promising him that he should have a run in the garden later. Omar was used to the confinement of a flat, and did not miss the outside world as a country cat would have done; but he was seven or eight years old and he disliked change. Vervain was standing at the window, watching the cat lap up his milk, when she heard the sound of a car, and turned in time to see it come in through the gate and along the short sweep of gravel to the porch. Her room overlooked the front garden, a small space of turf and weeping standards, the roses over the porch climbing up even round her windows and tossing trusses of bloom about her sill.

THE HOLIDAY HUSBAND

visitor getting out of the car and being admitted to the house, was her enemy of the station. She recognised him at once, though he had changed his khaki for a suit of weeds. He was still very smart and clean, and more than ever as though he had just eaten a good dinner, she thought.

"I wonder if this is chance, or whether he is going to carry the war into the enemy's country!" said Vervain. "Better go down and see."

She passed Omar, already back in his basket and purring himself to sleep, glanced at herself in the glass, and went upstairs. Years ago Ted Egerton had discovered that Vervain Chalmont seldom walked, and Vervain had grown no slower in her movements. As she entered the drawing-room Mrs. Coppleston was still waiting to receive her guest, who was holding not one of her hands with very genuine pleasure. "A day older!" Vervain heard him say. "And more charming than ever! It is topping luck to find you here in the neighbourhood."

"I heard that you were back, this morning," said Mrs. Coppleston, who could be mischief incarnate and was now of Vervain entering behind Colonel Swayne's door. "A friend of ours saw you at the station. Wasn't the young lady very much frightened of your coming quite an upset, we heard! Fur flying in all directions!"

"What are the rights of the case, George?" asked Mr. Coppleston with his arm round Vervain's shoulder as she stood beside him. "Do you really own a hound who flies at harmless people when they claim their property?"

Colonel Swayne swung round to answer, and found himself confronted by the old gentleman and a slender girl who was looking at him with clear and absolutely unembarrassed eyes. His impression of the morning that she was perfectly turned out—to use his own expression—was confirmed by her flowered Summer gown and the small feet and ankles showing under the frills, and he was a connoisseur in women's dress. He could see the dark silky hair now that she had no hat on, and the unexpected lights in it, and he knew as well as the girl herself that the style of dressing it low on her forehead suited the oval face and the wide eyes.

"My god-daughter, Miss Coppleston," said Mr. Coppleston with intense appreciation of the situation.

But there was no taking advantage of Colonel Swayne, whose military strategy did not fail him even in a social dilemma. "I have come to make my apologies to Miss Coppleston," he said at once, holding out his hand to the girl. "I had the misfortune to make her very angry with me this morning, and she ran away before I could ask for forgiveness." He stood looking down at her as he spoke with her hand in his, and Vervain felt the pressure of his fingers tighten a little as he made his debonair apology. It was quite plain that he bore no malice, and equally plain that he meant her to make amends for her rudeness in a subtle feminine manner that appealed to him. She looked back into his provocative eyes with perfect composure.

"*I am not going to apologise!*" she said defiantly.

Mr. and Mrs. Coppleston both laughed. "Vervain arrived home in a state of dangerous indignation," said Mr. Coppleston. "She admitted having charged both

you and your dog to rescue her cat, and abused you heartily, but she was not in the least penitent—you see that she is not now!”

“I don’t want her to be penitent—I want her to forgive me, and to start fresh! That was the most unfortunate beginning for any friendship.”

“Yes, it suggested a cat and dog life!” said Vervain, drawing her hand out of his as he did not seem inclined to let it go. She was, as she had told Egerton, intensely sensitive to touch, and it made her fastidious with regard to strangers. “It was thoughtful of you not to bring the Sealyham at any rate.”

“Miss Copleston, I should not dare!” he said with mock deference, and left her wondering what there really was that he would not dare.

During the years that had elapsed since her first connection with the Coplestons, Vervain had met many men who had shown signs of being attracted, and had made tentative efforts to attract her in turn. She had learned to fence with many weapons, ridicule, prosaic common-sense, indifference, good comradeship—but she had always succeeded in averting a crisis for reasons of her own. The reaction after her experience with Ted Egerton had made her far less accessible to the opposite sex instead of more so, and though she thrust the Holiday Husband into the background of her mind he was still there, a warning shadow that reminded her of her one fatal experiment. Married men were labelled dangerous on the surface; even bachelors were possible pitfalls, and if their intensions were honest—well, she did not want to marry. She would hardly admit to herself that she did not feel herself free to marry, but she un-

consciously judged the situation from their point of view if they had known. She had learned that she was a magnet for some men, and was on the alert for it. Colonel Swayne might be dismissed as a universal flirt, but she could not afford to be included in the list of his successes.

She busied herself at the tea-table during his visit, and was not to be drawn into the conversation he carried on with her godparents, though she showed him no more hostility. If he had not made up his mind to do so he would have got no further speech with her; but that quality of assurance she had discovered in him was not easy to combat. The man was practically unsnubable. He walked across the room and stood beside her to make his farewell, looking down again on the slight, vivid figure that was so quivering with life and movement even when she was still.

"I hear that you approve of my house, Miss Copleston, even though you do not of the owner!" he said, and the very tone was a challenge.

"I approve of the outside of it," said Vervain coolly. "I have never been further."

She was thinking that as far as the outside went she approved of the owner also; but she did not know that she had betrayed her thought until he laughed, and then she flushed for the first time and delighted him.

"I have asked Mrs. Copleston to bring you over to see it," he said. "It is a bachelor establishment and you must make allowances. But all its resources are at your disposal."

But Vervain was angry with herself for blushing and perverse in consequence. "You have asked my god-

mother, but you did not think it necessary to ask me," she said. "I shan't come!"

"Oh yes you will, if I have to come over and carry you off by force."

"Those are the wrong tactics. I never yield to force."

"What do you yield to? Coaxing?"

"Only to my own will, I am afraid."

"Then I must evidently make our two wills as one! I have a fancy that we shall want the same thing."

"I am sorry for you if we do. I shall inevitably get it first."

"Oh, we should share it. I expect we have a lot in common. Even dogs! You like dogs really, you know—you were far more angry with me than with Get-away to-day."

"It was not the dog's fault—it was only his instinct," she said quickly, and then laughed at herself. "I think you ought to keep him on lead in a station, or hook your stick in his collar, or something."

"He has got a bit out of hand through being at the Timber House without me. He wants a lesson or two, that's all."

"I think it is you who want the lesson!" said Vervain hotly. "I have no doubt a good beating would not do you any harm."

The pupils of the liquid eyes were expanding again as in the morning, and he looked into them with a stirred sense of curiosity. She had passion, this little girl, and she was easily aroused. He took her hand in his before she intended to give it to him, and held it. "You shall give me as many lessons as you like," he said. "I'll

put a hunting crop into your hands if you wish. I wonder if you would use it!"

"No!" said Vervain, with a sense of humiliated shame. "I should not use it—and you know that I should not!"

Her hand lay warm in his, and he felt a little pulse start and beat unevenly against his own. He had not realised how much the scene of the morning had shaken her until he saw her lip quiver like a child's. George Swayne was not accustomed to letting the grass grow under his feet, and had they been alone he would probably have drawn her head against his shoulder and treated her exactly as if she were six instead of six-and-twenty. The presence of Mr. and Mrs. Copleston saved Vervain from what would have been a disagreeable shock, for she had no idea of the lengths to which he had gone already in his thoughts. She only saw that he was really and honestly sorry for upsetting her, and she heard with vague surprise a new note in his voice before he turned away.

"There, I won't tease you any more! You have had as much as you can carry to-day. I'll make it up to you some time, child."

Then he was gone, Mr. Copleston walking out to the porch with him himself, as a guest for whom he had a personal liking; and Vervain was left with the disgusted impression that she must have made a fool of herself—the man would never have dared to look, to speak, like that, if she had kept her usual self-reliant manner.

"George always puts me in mind of that Frenchman—Danton, was it not?—who said '*De l'audace, encore*'

de l'audace, toujours de l'audace!" said Mrs. Coppleson, smiling over her late visitor in reminiscence. "I wonder that he has never married."

"I don't!" said Vervain with more earnestness than she was aware. "I should think he would have to cut himself into small pieces to satisfy all the claims on him, if he did."

CHAPTER XV

"Look in my face: my name is Might-have been;
I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell;
Unto thine ear I hold the dead-sea shell
Cast up thy Life's foam-fretted feet between.

Mark me, how still I am! But should there dart
One moment through thy soul the soft surprise
Of that winged Peace which lulls the breath of sighs—
Then shalt thou see me smile, and turn apart
Thy visage to mine ambush at thy heart
Sleepless with cold commemorative eyes."

—D. G. Rossetti.

THREE weeks later Mrs. Seymour herself came down to Winslow to reclaim her cat and to get a few days' rest and quiet in the country, for like many courageous women she was doing war work beyond her strength or the limits of her age. She looked very tired and worn, and Vervain longed to treat her exactly as she had Omar Khyyam—put her to bed in a basket and feed her up on the most nourishing diet she could obtain. Omar had improved under her remedies, and she was proud of him. He now walked about the garden as if it were his own, and his backbone was not perceptible to anyone who stroked him. If Anne Seymour had been able to spare three weeks Vervain felt that she could have got her into as respectable condition as the cat. The positions were now reversed, for it was Vervain who looked at Anne's white, tired face with dissatisfied eyes, and wondered how

much strain she could bear without breaking under it.

"I feel such a drone!" she said remorsefully. "There are no Huts near enough for me to kill myself with standing, or catch cold in draughts. Godmother and I make linen helmets and knit socks, and have hot young men in khaki to tea; but Bletchley is too far off to absorb our energies!"

"You do quite enough—though I have no doubt that Colonel Swayne would find you work if you asked him, and absorb you, body and soul, as well as your energies!"

Mrs. Seymour's smile, though tired, was extremely amused. She had come down to the Rosary to find it so constantly invaded by one visitor that a day never passed without their seeing him. She had known Colonel Swayne for years, not so much in his own county as in London and at friends' houses, and had had a light-hearted flirtation with him when they were ten or fifteen years younger, for they were about the same age. Neither of them had burned their fingers, perhaps because the fire they played with was not hot enough, but the incident had left Anne with some cause for reflection, and a few memories. Since then his name had been coupled with many women's in a fast hunting country, and not without cause. He was not immaculate, but she reflected that he would make a very good husband.

"George Swayne is in earnest!" she said to herself with some surprise. It seemed a little odd that the Gay Lothario should capitulate at fifty to a mere girl, or one might say a very young woman. Vervain looked as much less than her age at twenty-six as she had looked more than it at twenty. She was not at all the kind of

woman Anne would have selected as marrying George Swayne, with his reputation and experience. She had imagined something more bouncing, carrying him with a dash, or a type of mere prettiness that was so emphatic it could never be passed over. Vervain had developed a subtle beauty that at times was all-powerful, but it owed half its charm to her own character and personality, and Mrs. Seyrhour had not given Swayne credit for seeing or feeling this.

"It will be hard on Uncle Hugh and Aunt Anstice if he marries her now," she thought with a sigh. "They are so old, and they dote on her! I wish she could have waited till—till they did not want her any more." Not even in her thoughts would she speak of death in connection with the beloved old couple. It was almost a superstition. Then her thoughts reverted to Swayne.

"Tiresome man! why did he want to upset the arrangement that worked so well?"

Of the girl's own feelings Anne could not judge. She was very friendly with the Colonel, almost to the point of intimacy, and she seemed unusually alive to his presence—perhaps a little flattered by the attentions of such a man, as any girl might be, for he was not only a person of consequence in the neighbourhood, he had won his laurels in the War and his name was on the lips of men. But Anne remembered a year in Vervain Chalmont's life when she had thought that she was "riding for a fall" and wondered what would have happened if no one had gone to her aid. She did not know what had caused the girl to get that face which Mrs. Coppleston called the "stray cat," or to look on the world with such sleepless suspicion; but she imagined a male agency,

and wondered if it had left a permanent mark on Vervain's life.

On the last day of her brief holiday Mrs. Seymour went with her uncle and aunt and Vervain to tea at the Timber House. It was, as Vervain had said, a delightful place, with a great hall forty feet long that ran up three stories in height, the roof timbers being still blackened by smoke from the open hearth in the floor. The arms of Colonel Swayne's ancestors were carved on the hammer beams, one family after another that had built and held the old house, and handed it down by right of marriage or inheritance, and at the west end was the dais where they had sat raised some fifteen feet above their household or retainers. This was the oldest portion of the building, and the more habitable apartments were of later date. The Coppleston party had tea in a room on the upper floor which is known as the "Solar" in such manor houses; and which, despite its great stone fireplace, open roof, and oriel windows, had a pleasant, lived-in atmosphere, for it was littered with masculine paraphernalia of all sorts—whips, crops, spurs, golf sticks, pipes, sporting papers and books, and flung open on the battered oak table an odd volume of Dickens illustrated by Hablot K. Browne, which the master of the house seemed to have been reading to judge from the cigarette ash scattered on its pages. Mrs. Seymour laughed when she saw this last.

"I am glad somebody still reads Dickens besides myself," she said. "A young man asked me in confidence the other day what *was* the origin of calling your umbrella a Gamp? He had an idea that Gamp was an

inventor and a contemporary of James Watt or Stephenson, but he did not want to display his ignorance!"

"It seems impossible that Dickens can ever grow out of date!" said Mrs. Coppleston fondly, looking at the open page where Carker was represented biting his nails and glaring at Edith Dombey who threatened him with the carving knife. "I can recall a time when people knew the 'Pickwick Papers' by heart—yes, I am old enough for that, George!—and what a scream we thought them." One of the most delightful results of Vervain's adoption by her Household Saints had been the transference of her modern slang to their mouths. Mrs. Coppleston could assimilate the most cryptic phrases and give them a flavouring of her own when she reproduced them with relish.

"What strikes me about Dickens is the enormous fuss he makes over a situation," said Vervain ingenuously. "Now just think of that scene between Edith Dombey and Carker. It was most important that she should get rid of him and make tracks before Mr. Dombey arrived—every second was of value. Yet she stands there denouncing him—with the carving knife!—for pages before she vanishes through the door behind her. Nowadays she would have said, 'Look here, my boy, it's off!'—and that would have settled it."

"A modernised Dickens would be awfully funny!" Anne admitted. "I wish they would write a 'Dickens Up-to-date,' in 'Punch.'"

"He isn't out of favour with the masses even now," said Swayne, leaning over Vervain's shoulder to look at Carker. Anne did not know that he had touched her until she saw the girl throw up her head like a restive

horse and push the volume pettishly away. She remembered showing the same revolt to masculine proximity in her own youth—and she felt suddenly old. No man would ever lean over her like that again; and yet George and she were the same age, and he was enjoying fresh experiences even at the present moment, while her day was past. It was something to be grateful for that she had had it, for to have been a woman and never to have been pretty is a tragedy. "The Tommies will still listen to a Dickens' reading better than most entertainments," Swayne went on easily, by no means discomposed by Miss Copleston's abrupt movement. "One of the best readings I ever heard took place in a recreation hut at the Front last year."

"By one of the men?" asked Mrs. Copleston with interest.

"No, I am bound to say it was an officer—a man named Barchard."

"Not Sir Theodore Barchard by any chance?" said Anne Seymour suddenly, looking across the comfortably littered room with startled eyes.

"Yes—that's the man. He was in the A.S.C.—been wounded, and unable to return to his own regiment I think. Is he a friend of yours?"

"Not exactly—but he married a relation. You don't happen to know where he is?"

"I do, Mrs. Seymour. He is home on leave and very injured because his wife is in Jersey. Poor chap! he wrote me such a homesick letter that I thought of asking him down here."

"That is just like Violet," said Anne, with unusual impatience. "I think she is the most selfish woman I

know. She moved Heaven and earth and the War Office to get to Jersey under some excuse of meeting her husband there, because in reality she thought it good for her own health and her people own property in the Channel Islands. And when he found that he could not join her, of course she did not think it worth while to come home again—I suppose he is on short leave?”

“Yes.”

“Aunt Anstice, I think we ought to ask him down—I am afraid so, at any rate.”

“I was thinking so also!” said Mrs. Copleston with comical dismay. “And you are bound to go up to London to-morrow I suppose. Well, Vervain and I must do our best with him.”

“I will take him off your hands with pleasure, Mrs. Copleston,” said Colonel Swayne good-naturedly. “We were thrown a good deal in each other’s way in France, and I know him fairly well.”

“That is more than we do then,” grumbled Mrs. Seymour. “He is almost a stranger to me, and quite one to my aunt and uncle. But if he is in London I might manage to see him before he comes down—if he accepts the invitation—and make him understand that it will be a very quiet way of spending his leave.”

“I am afraid that will be the attraction!” laughed Swayne. “The poor chap has never quite got over the shrapnel bestowed on him by the Boches, and he mopes like a sick cat—I beg your pardon, Miss Vervain! I know that is a dangerous subject to mention.”

Vervain coloured generously. She had grown to be a little ashamed when she thought of their first encounter, and as a matter of fact she was at the present moment

sitting with her arm round Get-away, who had scrambled up on her chair and assumed the liberties of a privileged friend. Get approved of Vervain. She could whistle like a man, so that you did not lose her in a wood even if you went after a badger, and she played fair at tea-time and remembered that it is share and share alike with the cake in war-time.

"Get doesn't remember old scores against me," she said hastily.

"Neither will I—when you treat me as you treat Get!"

She drew away her arm instinctively, understanding him too well, and the dog, thinking himself neglected, reached up a wet nose and touched her cheek. Whereupon Vervain recovered herself. "You see that my indulgence only leads him to take liberties," she said, wiping her cheek daintily.

"You think I might take liberties also?" he said promptly, and she knew, without looking, the expression in his gay blue eyes.

"I do not intend to try!" said Vervain courageously, rising to join her godmother. The lure of the Adventure was tugging at her heart-strings, but she turned from it panic-stricken. It had snared her once too often.

"I think you are wise not to tempt me!" said Swayne's whisper at her ear, and the echo of his ardent voice accompanied her all the way home and repeated itself in the rhythm of the pony's feet. Not to tempt me! not to tempt me! it reiterated, while Mrs. Coppleston and Mrs. Seymour talked of Sir Theodore and his necessary invitation.

"We can't leave him homeless," said Mrs. Coppleston, "or he will think the whole family as inconsiderate as Violet. Oh, Anne dearest, I hope it is not unkind to say that I do wish he had not married her!"

"I daresay he wishes the same thing often enough," said Mrs. Seymour with brutal frankness. "I have never met any woman so armoured in self as Violet. She makes herself the first consideration even with the Almighty, I feel quite sure. And yet she has married twice."

"But it is always the worst wives who marry. And perhaps she shows a better side to men than she does to women."

"I suppose I am uncharitable, but really it is astonishing when you see people as unattractive as that annex men so easily. I wonder if you remember her, Vervain—you saw her once when you were at the Colonial Women's League. She was Mrs. Jackson then."

Vervain's thoughts had been left behind at the Timber House, and were still in the Solar with its modern muddle of bachelor belongings that seemed touched with their owner's personality. She had liked it—yes, all the significant trifles that told of George Swayne's tastes, though they were just the ordinary man's hobbies and not in the least striking or original. She liked him too, she admitted that to herself, and it had been a temptation to her to go a little further with him than she had with other men. If he were a bit of a rake the *gamin* in her met him half way with secret sympathy. "Not to tempt him!" said the pony's feet, "Not to tempt him!" and it was then that Mrs. Seymour spoke to her.

She almost betrayed herself by a start, but turned quickly interested eyes on the speaker.

"I remember Mrs. Jackson particularly well," she said, "because she had the most irritating characteristics I ever met with. I could not bear her voice—it was undeveloped, like a child's."

"She thinks it is so plaintive!" said Anne maliciously. "You are quite right—it is maddening to listen to after a time."

"I thought if I were her husband I should murder her, or die, myself, or something desperate!"

"Well, he did die—and she has married Sir Theodore Barchard."

"Poor man! What is he like?"

"Rather attractive from your point of view, since I heard you tell poor George Swayne to-day that you liked a man to look like a priest!"

Vervain laughed a little. "I thought he was swanking over his moustache. He had waxed the ends. Go on, Anne—the Barchard man begins to interest me."

"He is tall and thin, clean-shaven and ascetic, as far as I can remember. I know I thought he looked like a scholar, and he sings rather well."

"That is fatal," said Vervain gravely. "I feel that he is my ideal, and I shall meet my fate in him. Godfather, do you think it is right to invite anyone so fascinating under the same roof with your good little godchild?"

"No indeed I don't, for Barchard's sake!" Mr. Coppleston retorted. "I shall warn him of my good little godchild's wiles the instant he enters the house. 'Trust

her not—she is fooling thee!’ I shall warble, though you have not hair of golden hue, Vervie.”

“No—it cuts my chances a little. Fair women can look intensely innocent or intensely wicked. I hope Sir Theodore does not admire fair women—his wife was fairish, wasn’t she?”

“Mouse-coloured,” said Anne, who declined to varnish her statements this afternoon. “She sent me a charming photo the other day that is not at all like her, and one of her husband. They have been married two years, and she still sends portraits of them both to her female relations as if they were a bride and bridegroom.”

“Oh, Anne, have you got his with you? Do show it to us!”

“Vervie is excited—ominous sign!” said Mr. Coppleston. “Don’t drive us into Chalmont’s lodge even if you are thinking of the coming visitor, childie. He may not come after all, you know.”

“I’m so sorry, Godfather—Joey shied at the steam-roller,” said Vervain, scraping her cousin’s front gates and steadying the pony. She had become a fairly good whip with a year’s constant practice, in a pony-cart at any rate. “But the photo, Anne—have you really got him with you?”

“No, of course I haven’t,” said Mrs. Seymour indignantly. “As if I should travel with Theodore Barchard’s likeness! I will send it down to you from town, if I did not destroy it.”

She left Winslow the next day, Omar accompanying her in the hamper, and herself armed with an invitation to the homeless man to finish his leave at the Rosary unless his wife were on her way home—“Which she

won't be!" said Anne with certainty. "She has taken her health seriously for fifteen years, and she is not going to alter her habits for a second marriage." Two days later there arrived a letter in which Mrs. Seymour said she had met Sir Theodore and that he had gratefully accepted the invitation for a few days at least, as his own house in the country was turned into a convalescent home for officers, and Lady Barchard had thoughtfully shut the flat in town when she went to Jersey.

"He would like to come down at once, if you can be ready for him, as there is not much of his leave left," wrote Anne. "I hate to rush you, but I know there is plenty of room, and I told him to 'phone you and run down the same day that you get this." Then there was a postscript—"I am so sorry that I must have burnt those portraits, and the only thing I can find is one that Violet gave me of him when they were first married. I am afraid it will be a shock for Vervain—but I assure her he does not look like that now."

Mrs. Coppleston glanced at the faded photograph enclosed before she handed it to Vervain who was sitting at her feet, chatting to her over the breakfast in bed which was one of the few concessions to age made by the old lady. It was a very dainty age, from the bou-doir cap made of Buckingham laces and faint lavender ribbons, to the dimity bedspread strewn with pink rose-buds, a worthy setting to the dear, lined face and faded hazel eyes that her god-daughter thought the most love-able on earth. The girl had breakfasted with her god-father long since, for he kept the habits of his youth though he was seventy-five.

As she sat on the bed, Vervain had her back to the

light, and whatever alteration passed over her face was quite invisible to Mrs. Coppleston. She took the photograph with some interest, and held it up to the light, revealing the discoloured likeness of a bearded man with a curious line of brow which gave the face a suggestion of tragedy. There was not one moment's hesitation in her recognition of it, nor could she make any mistake as to his identity. It was Ted Egerton.

CHAPTER XVI

"I that have slept, awake, and you
Sleep, who last year were well awake.
Though love do all that love can do
My heart will never ache or break
For your heart's sake."

—A. C. Swinburne.

THE blow had fallen so suddenly that for the minute she could not think what to do. Mrs. Copleston was speaking, making arrangements, asking her to see that the unexpected guest had everything ready for him.

"Your godfather can go to the station, with the boy to drive him," she said, wrinkling up her old rose-leaf face. "And you will see to his room, Vervie? Where shall we put him?"

"In the garden room I should think," Vervain found herself answering mechanically. "Don't let us give Anne's room to anybody, in case she wants to run down for a night." She laid the photograph down on the pretty bedspread, amongst the pictured rosebuds, and got off the bed. "I'll go and see that the windows are opened and the room aired," she added. "Any more orders, Godmother?"

"About dinner, dearest——" said Mrs. Copleston, hesitatingly. "It is so difficult to get fish here—and they may not send it down by train."

"I'll telephone. Then Godfather can meet this man and the salmon and bring them home together."

"You are a treasure, Vervie! Perhaps if you saw cook? Tell her there's an extra gentleman—cook always thinks that it is up to her to come out strong for a gentleman!"

"I'll tell her." It shot through her reluctant mind that she could arrange a dinner to Ted's taste far better than the cook. As she had told him long ago his sense of taste was rather finely developed, and he appreciated his food like the epicure rather than the gourmand.

She stooped and kissed Mrs. Coppleston with a lingering tenderness that had something of agony in it. It seemed to her that she had never known how much she loved her Household Saints until threatened with a dreadful sense of loss through Ted's reappearance in her life. It was a relief to get away, and to have time to settle the disorder in her mind, even though she was busying herself about his reception and comfort all the while.

If there had been more time before his arrival she would have laid the situation in all its ugly aspects before her godparents, and left them to decide on it, even though it made her heart ache to think of the grief and humiliation before them all. But it was almost impossible to put him off now, and if he arrived after all when she had made her confession the position was too uncomfortable to tolerate. In her bewilderment at the malignity of fate it seemed better to keep silence and to meet the man as if he were the stranger that he ought to have been. It would be punishment enough for her then—she would not avoid one stab of the Nemesis that pursued her. But at least she need not punish the dear

old people. As to the man, he would, of course, come off scot free, as he had all along.

She went into the pretty room overlooking the garden at the back of the house—she had chosen it as far from her own as possible, with a sense of revulsion,—and saw that everything was in order. The servants were so thorough and well-trained that there was really nothing to do, but as she looked round she was haunted again by a horrible knowledge of his personal tastes.

“I wonder if he still likes the hardest pillow, and can’t sleep with his head low?” she thought. “And they have put scented soap on the washstand—he hates scented soap. I had better get a cake of brown Windsor.”

She wished she were not forced to remember. Such intimate details belonged to his wife. For the first time the vulgarity of what she had done struck her, and she felt that she had been underbred rather than immoral. In principle she still stood to her opinion that she had been a free agent, and justified in doing as she pleased with her own life so long as it involved no one but herself. Unfortunately in practice it had involved others—first, Netta, now Mr. and Mrs. Coppleston, and who could say how many more might not be ensnared in the same net? She no longer repudiated the responsibility as she tasted the bitter brew from her crop of wild oats. What a fool she had been to rush headlong into the first experience of love offered to her! At the time it had seemed the single chance of a lifetime, and that her youth might slip by with nothing to redeem its grayness if she did not grasp her opportunity. And now that life was opening round her more and more, she was handicapped by that one crude folly. It had made her

reticent with men where other girls were untrammelled; it imperilled her relations even with her godparents, and seemed to distort and discolour her whole life. If it had only been worth while, and she could have declared that it was paramount to all that came before and after—if she had only gone on loving Ted with one unalterable passion—it would have restored her self-respect. But she knew that it was not so. She had grown to care for him at the time, and had suffered more and more after he went away, until his letter had been like a douche of cold water, and then gradually her feeling for him died out as all immature things do, and she found no justification for herself even in her brief passion for the man. Now that she was going to meet him again after a lapse of six years she was only conscious of a certain indecency in their crossing each other's paths, and a revulsion that was almost nausea for the part she had to play. She had been living in close association with the Copplestons and their circle for five years, and her point of view had insensibly changed and become theirs. Girls did not do what she had done, in their world. It made her a pariah at once to admit that she had deliberately become a man's mistress for a fortnight for the sake of the experience. It was something outside the pale that one did not even dream of doing. Marriage was taken rather as a matter of course, and adultery was ignored equally as a matter of course. It was inevitable that the influences round her should impress themselves upon a very quick mind and sympathy, for though she was not plastic Vervain was extremely adaptable.

She went downstairs to Mr. Coppleston's study when

she had left the garden room in order for the coming guest, and took down a volume of Burke's Peerage and Baronetage. She was curious to know if Ted had lied to her or had changed his name for some reason not chargeable to him. Barchard—here it was; Sir Theodore Egerton Barchard, eighth baronet. It was a fairly old title though a poor one. His father had been Colonel Sir Philip Egerton Barchard. There had been no alteration of name at all.

So Ted had lied. A little smile lifted her upper lip as she realised why. He had been afraid of compromising himself—possibly afraid of being blackmailed if his family were known to the girl who took him for her Holiday Husband. She smiled again, with cruel, half-closed eyes, as she faced the situation. She had accepted him so frankly, without the least equivocation of her own circumstances, that it seemed ludicrous. As he had lied in one thing she suspected that he had lied in others, and wondered if he had really been engaged at the time, since he had not married till two years ago. Probably he had married Mrs. Jackson out of pity, and the protective instinct which was strong in him, when her husband died. She jumped to the right conclusions with a woman's intuition.

Mr. Coppleston came into the room while she was turning over the leaves of the Peerage; and laughed at her.

"Caught you, Pussy!" he said. "You were looking up his pedigree."

"Yes, I was," said Vervain quietly. "It is always well to know the worst in these cases."

"He telephoned twenty minutes ago that he would

come down by the afternoon train. Anstice says I am to meet him at the station. Don't you think you had better come too?"

"No," said Vervain with mock gravity. "Anne sent us a photograph of him this morning, and he had a beard. True, she assured us that it was taken before his marriage. But until I am sure that he is clean-shaven I had better stay here to support the shock if he were not."

"I'll promise to miss him on the platform if he is hirsute!"

"Oh, Godfather, if you only would!" said Vervain with a little heartfelt cry that she checked. "I am going to cut roses to put in his room," she added, moving to the open window. "What time will he get here?"

"We ought to be in by five o'clock."

Vervain stepped down into the sunny garden, and wandered off amongst the rose-beds. They were short of a gardener, and she had laboured much amongst the roses, herself, under Mr. Coppleston's tuition. The velvet faces seemed to look at her in mute reproach that she had brought them into being for *this*!

"I won't cut Clos Vougeot or Madame Heriot for him," she thought with childish repugnance. "The ramblers are good enough."

So she filled the vases with Dorothy Perkins and Hia-watha and white Sweetheart, and then closed the door of the garden room hoping that she need not enter it again during his stay. How long would he stay? Anne had said his leave was short. Perhaps when he found who was under the same roof with him he would leave—she almost persuaded herself that any decent man would

leave. This afternoon and evening would be bad enough at any rate, and they would be a *partie carée*—no, with a sudden inspiration she remembered George Swayne, and ran up to her godmother's room with the idea.

"I've just remembered that Colonel Swayne is a friend of his, Godmother. Suppose we ask him to come over and dine? It will make things go, even if Sir Theodore is a bore."

"Capital, Vervie! Why didn't we think of it before? Run down and telephone him at once. I hope he isn't engaged."

"He mustn't be," said Vervain decidedly, and did not hear her godmother laugh.

Her spirits rose as she got the Timber House on the telephone, and heard the familiar bold voice at the other end of the wire.

"Hulloa, Miss Coppleston! Good morning. It is very nice to hear your voice, but I wish I could see your face too . . ."

"You can see it to-night if you will come to dinner. We want you particularly . . ."

"I am booked to Wedderburn-Chalmont, I believe. Who is it that 'particularly' wants me? . . ."

"Mrs. Coppleston. She has got Sir Theodore Barchard coming down unexpectedly, and depends on you to come and help . . ."

"I am afraid I promised Weddy . . ."

"Mr. Coppleston is relying on you too. You see they have never met this man, and you know him . . ."

"Oh, he's a decent chap. You will find him a boon . . ."

"Is he so easy to entertain? . . ."

"No, but you are so easily entertaining! . . ."

"All the same we would rather that you were here . . ."

"Who is it that wants me 'particularly'? . . ."

"I do!" . . . said Vervain, with the sensation of a gambler throwing the dice. She waited a moment's breath and added, "Now are you dining with Mr. Wedderburn-Chalmont or with us? . . ."

"With you! . . ." said the decided voice, and Vervain thrilled with a secret sympathy. This man always knew what he wanted and went straight for his goal. He would never "wince, and relent, and refrain," once he had made up his mind. Even now he had got exactly the admission he meant to have from her over the telephone, and in some subtle fashion she shared his triumph.

It had never occurred to her before to think seriously of marrying George Swayne, but the idea awoke in her mind with a sense of rescue, and she dwelt on it at intervals all through the hours of suspense before Barchard's arrival. She did not think she wanted to marry, and she knew that as long as Mr. and Mrs. Coppleston wanted her to live with them she would never leave them. But would they, after she had made her confession? Would it not be intolerable to have her in the family, connected as it was with Barchard through Violet Jackson? It would be almost impossible to avoid the contingency of meetings for ever, and they would all be haunted by the sour knowledge of what lay behind them. Perhaps it would be a relief to her godparents if she could come to them and say "Colonel Swayne has asked me to marry him—he will take charge of me henceforth." It certainly seemed a way out of the difficulty.

She had flirted more with Swayne than with any younger man who had made advances to her since her holiday with Ted. There was something infectious about Swayne's good spirits and his dashing style of wooing. "De l'audace—et encore de l'audace—et toujours de l'audace!" He had startled her of late and made her inclined to retreat before his determined advances, and she had wondered, with a very girlish naivety, if such a notorious Lothario were really in love with her. It seemed as if she had only to hold out her hand—and she was suddenly intent on doing so. True, he was fifty, even older than Barchard, and with more of a gap between their ages; but he was as vigorous as many younger men, and she was aware that he suited her better than most.

"He is a bit of a rogue, and I am a bit of a *gamin*," she thought. "Neither could accuse the other. I could make a success of married life with him when I should fail with a more exacting husband. I think he would be good to me, and I would not ask too much—I have learned my lesson."

In some women's lives there is no Fairy Prince; there is only the second best, the one taken for lack of a better. Ted had never been the Fairy Prince, and she did not ask that George Swayne should be. Enough if she might clear up the muddle of her life by the desperate remedy of marriage, and avoid all further implication of others in her mistake.

She filled in the intermediate hours with an errand to a house in the neighbourhood where there were girls of her own age; returning in time to be at her godmother's

elbow about the time that Mr. Coppleston might be expected from the station with his guest.

"I am so thankful George is coming!" Mrs. Coppleston confided to her as they sat and knitted in the irregular, pretty drawing-room where the roses nodded in at the open windows as they did in Vervain's bed-room, and there were great bowls of cut flowers to add to the scent. "I can't help feeling a little nervous because Violet has behaved so oddly to him, and after all she is one of the family!"

"I don't see why he should vent that on us. I should think it would be a relief to be rid of the sound of her voice."

"I am afraid he will feel a little injured. Between you and me, Vervie, she was the most unattractive creature I ever knew—she made me feel quite savage with her at times, she was so colourless."

"I can imagine you savage, Godmother. Your eyes would flash, and I think your pretty hair would rise up like the crest of a cockatoo!"

"I have a temper, my dear—all really nice women have. Violet had none. She could not blaze up, she only nagged, and she said jagged things that made wounds."

"I am growing more and more sorry for Sir Theodore."

"Yes. I am so glad we put those roses in his room, and picked the strawberries for tea. I suppose he must like roses and strawberries, though he has lived in tropical places for so long."

"I don't know," said Vervain, and felt thankful that she really did not. Her brief knowledge of Ted had

ceased with the Spring. Then she lowered her busy needles for a minute. "That is the cart!" she said.

Mrs. Coppleston stopped knitting in her turn, but did not hurry out to the door as she and her husband had a lovable habit of doing for favoured guests. The next moment Mr. Coppleston was ushering in the visitor, talking in his delightful, easy old voice, and evidently putting the rather silent man at his ease.

The situation suddenly struck Vervain as ludicrously ugly, and she had a mirthless desire to laugh as she knitted another row while Mrs. Coppleston was making Ted welcome and thanking him for accepting such an impromptu invitation. It was Mr. Coppleston who said "This is our god-daughter—Sir Theodore Barchard—Miss Coppleston," giving them the full dignity of the introduction, and she deliberately put down her knitting and shook hands, looking up a little curiously as at a stranger.

And for the minute he seemed a stranger. He was so much thinner than she remembered him as to appear even taller, and his face had altered by being clean-shaven. She saw now that the beard had squared it, and that it was rather narrow, with a mouth that was too sensitive and a chin that was too long. He looked almost ascetic, save for the suspicion of fire in the eyes that were no longer vaguely but emphatically tragic. Either his marriage had been a failure, or the experience of the War had laid its mark upon him, for she was dully surprised to see that he had suffered. Of the two she must appear the more successful, the happier, the more prosperous, she realised. But he hardly appeared to look at her beyond common courtesy, and he followed Mrs. Cop-

pleston at once to the tea-table where she fussed over him a little nervously and tried to penetrate the curious atmosphere of silence about him which seemed to have increased.

"And what are we to call you?" said the old lady, with a very charming frankness. "Theodore is rather a mouthful, isn't it, Do you shorten it to Theo?"

"My own people generally call me Ted," he answered after the faintest hesitation. "My father did not like the name of Theodore, it was too theatrical. But it was a fancy of my mother's."

"Ted is much preferable," said Mrs. Coppleston, with relief. "I forgot that Theodore was ever shortened to Ted."

"Don't you remember that delightful book of Miss Alcott's, 'Little Women,' in which the boy's name is Theodore Lawrence?" Mr. Coppleston reminded her. "Most people called him Laurie, but Jo, the heroine of the tale, called him Ted or Teddy."

"So she did. How I loved that book when I first read it! Did you ever read Miss Alcott, Vervie?"

"Never!" said Vervain with a smile. "I was nourished on Rudyard Kipling and Jerome K. Jerome. We did not read women's books much if we could help it, at school."

"And Dickens," said Mr. Coppleston laughing. "You forget your modern version of Dombey. Swayne will never get over it."

"I believe you know Colonel Swayne, don't you, Ted?" said Mrs. Coppleston kindly and naturally. "He is a neighbour of ours, and he told us you had pigged it

together at the Front. He is coming over to dinner to-night."

Barchard looked up with some expression of interest. "George Swayne?" he said. "Yes, he was with the 6th Mercia. I believe he had raised his own battalion. I did not know where he squatted in England. I have only his Club for an address."

"He has a delightful house called the Timber House, a real old black and white manor that has not been much altered since it was built. Vervain thinks it the nicest house in the neighbourhood."

Vervain—always Vervain. This constant reference was unavoidable; but the girl herself wondered how he would stand it. She glanced at him, and in the same moment caught a sharpened look at herself as if there were some suggestion in the fact that she preferred the Timber House to all others. Their eyes met with a shock, as if they would both have avoided it, and fell away again.

After all the meeting had not been so terrible. He seemed as averse to the encounter as she, and if so it was easy to avoid each other for the time he should be at the Rosary. A passing wonder seized her that he should have been so unmoved when introduced to her in that ironical manner, and never betrayed the least surprise or recognition; but then she remembered that he had seen Mrs. Seymour in town and heard the extent of the household. It was possible that he learned the facts about her and her connection with the Copplestons from Anne, but it startled her that he should not have refused the invitation if he had done so. Perhaps he saw no way of excusing himself without some hint of

mystery; but it was strange that such a crisis should have come upon him in Anne's flat! She wondered if its familiarity jarred on him at all, if he felt any distaste for the associations it called up; and she laughed that characteristic laugh that ended in a sigh.

The evening was a reaction from the apprehension of the day, and she was so gay that she grew frightened at herself. At dinner Colonel Swayne and Mr. Copleston and she herself kept their end of the table lively, while Mrs. Copleston tried to show her gentle sympathy with the homeless guest whom fate had thrust upon them, with pauses in the conversation during which it seemed that they listened to the light toss of talk from the other three. Vervain was conscious that she was talking very well; she had never felt a greater grasp of her subjects, whether it might be politics, or some incident of the War, local gossip, or art. And the expression in Swayne's eyes gave her confidence. He admired her tonight, she swung him off his feet with the momentum of her own onward rush. The presence of the other man gave a fillip to his appreciation of her which was almost the pride of possession.

In the midst of a laughing discussion on the rationing scheme and its probable results, Barchard turned rather suddenly to his hostess.

"If it is not an impertinence to ask a lady's age, how old is Miss Copleston?"

"Vervain is twenty-six. She has the head of a woman of forty, has she not?" said her delighted godmother.

"Twenty-six—now! Are you sure?" For the moment he was off his guard. "I certainly think she must be older."

"My dear Ted, I am quite sure, for I happen to have seen the certificate of her birth. It was necessary for certain purposes that my husband and I had in our minds, and we obtained it quite easily. She is twenty-six this year. We think she looks younger if anything. It is only her brains that are older."

He leaned back in his chair for a moment in silent contemplation of the girl. She was a little flushed, and her eyes looked almost black in contrast. The vivid changeable face was as Nature had meant it to be, oval shaped and firm in flesh, not thin and flaccid with the strain of life. Certainly she did not look twenty-six. She looked far younger than she had done six years ago—and she was then twenty! An irrational resentment surged over him at the discovery of her real age when they had entered into that unstable marriage, and he thought she had deceived him, though he admitted reluctantly that she had never deliberately lied about it. He had suggested that she was six or seven and twenty, and she had accepted and seemed to admit it—why, he could not imagine. From his mother's standpoint she ought to have eagerly denied the least imputation of added years. If he had known that she was so young he might have acted differently—he told himself so, while in the same moment he felt a savage satisfaction that he had been first in the field, as it seemed that Swayne was going to be a bad second!

"I want you to come over to my place for the weekend, Barchard," the Colonel said to him before he left the Rosary that night. "How long is your leave?"

"Up next Thursday."

"Oh, well, come back here on Monday then. I can

find you a few rabbits if you care about more slaughter."

"Thanks," said Barchard quietly. He instantly suspected that Swayne was taking him off the hands of his present host and hostess, and that the invitation was inspired by Vervain's wishes. The house he was to stay in was the one in which she meant to live—and his host meant it too, as he knew by the intuition of every thwarted instinct of the male.

"I shall look forward to see the Timber House. Miss Copleston says it is the nicest in the neighbourhood, I hear," he said with an inscrutable smile.

"Colonel Swayne is tired of hearing that," said Vervain, shrugging her shoulders. "We have all told him so, many times."

Swayne took her hand in farewell, and held it with cool assurance.

"I wonder if you would like it so well if you lived in it!" he said audaciously.

"Ah! that is a different thing," she replied coolly. "One may admire a thing from a distance without wanting to take possession."

"I never admire without wanting to take possession—particularly to-night!"

Barchard, standing within earshot, caught the last two words, low as they were. He looked from Swayne to Vervain with a curious speculation, as if some new thought had struck him in seeing them together; but his covetous eyes lingered longest on the sealskin head that was turned away from him. He did not comment on the obvious, gay little flirtation that might mean much or little; but Mr. Copleston, turning at that instant to make a remark to the guest who was staying under

his roof, was so struck by his expression that he never made it. He said instead, to his wife, that Violet and her husband were possibly better suited to each other than they had fancied.

And George Swayne went home humming a bar or so from a song that Vervain had sung after dinner—

“When the flocks break up in March,
Will you pair with me?”

CHAPTER XVII

"Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a flattering look,
Some with a bitter word.
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword."

—*Oscar Wilde.*

THE few days that passed before Barchard went to the Timber House were a strain both upon Vervain's ingenuity and her independence of thought. She avoided being alone with him, and thought that he aided her, but to do so without appearing to do so required constant thought and planning, and she chafed against the duplicity. She had always been honest, both with herself and others, and to be forced into a false position as the result of her own action was a bitter humiliation. Sometimes she formed the desperate resolve of seeking an interview with Ted rather than avoiding it, and explaining her position to him; after which they could enter into a compact to ignore the past for evermore. Then again she felt by a truer instinct that her most honourable course was to confide in Mr. and Mrs. Coppleston rather than in Barchard. She owed him nothing but pain, and it was better to guard her reserve with him; on the other hand she owed her godparents so much that she could not live with the shadow of a deceit between them. As

soon as Barchard's leave was up and he had gone back to France, she must speak.

Mr. and Mrs. Coppleston were still her godparents only by intention, for she had never yet undergone the ordeal of a christening. She would cheerfully have faced it, but it puzzled her a little to find that they were in no hurry, and that it was some want in herself which they seemed silently waiting to fill before they stood her actual sponsors at the font. She accompanied them to service on Sundays with the same docility that she had attended it at school or in the Boltons—though she never went when she was “on her own” as she expressed it. The ritual struck her, frankly, as both tedious and full of absurdities, and she unconsciously spoke of it afterwards with a fine irony that had no intentional malice in it. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Coppleston seemed shocked or hurt, and indeed Vervain would have bitten her tongue out before she would have annoyed them intentionally. They laughed at her mimicry, and admitted the justice of her rather clever analysis; but she had the feeling that it was she rather than they who was being indulgently treated, like a child who had missed the meaning of something too large for it. They seldom or never referred to the deferred ceremony. They waited serenely.

Sir Theodore was going over to the Timber House in time for luncheon on the Saturday. He came out into the garden just as Vervain heard Colonel Swayne's car coming along the road to fetch him, and found her busy cutting roses for the rooms. She met him with exactly the ease and friendliness any girl might show to a guest staying in the house, with a subtle deference for

the fact that he was an older man and a connection—though not of hers.

"You are going to have a ripping week-end," she said, as she snipped away a dead Maiden's Blush. "I do hope you will admire the Timber House. I break the Tenth Commandment every time I go there."

"Swayne does not seem to mind!" he said, with a significance that caused her to look up quickly. Before she could speak he added with a resentment that staggered her, "You are looking very well—and very young! Mrs. Coppleston has told me your real age."

"There was never any concealment about my age!"

"I was under the impression that you were six years older than you are, any way."

Her cheeks faded from the colour of the Maiden's Blush in her hands to that of the Frau Karl Druschki she was going to cut.

"I do not see that it matters," she said curtly; but her heart beat with a sense of dismay. This was the first direct reference between them to any former knowledge of each other.

He did not answer, and in the pause she heard Colonel Swayne's confident voice coming from the open windows of the drawing-room. She had not expected him to come over with the car, as she knew that he was kept busy by war-work even though he was supposed to be having a rest; but as it was his only chance of seeing her to-day she might have guessed that he would take it. As once before, his suggested presence came like a rally, and she felt rescued. The blood flowed back to her face, from relief rather than embarrassment, and Barchard saw and interpreted it according to his lights.

"Colonel Swayne is honoured!" he said with a doubtful accent.

Vervain was instantly angry. She recognised the sneer and stigmatised it hotly as vile taste. As indeed it was from the point of view of cool blood; but she did not recognise the exceedingly simple organism of men which supplied the key to the riddle. For Barchard's blood was by no means cool, and the reason was so elementary as to be a danger hardly recognisable. He watched Vervain go forward to meet Swayne, which she did all the more eagerly for her resentment of his depreciation, and their laughing greeting amongst the roses. Swayne was displaying the empty buttonhole of his jacket with an obvious request, and Vervain filled it with an exquisite opening bud of the Clos Vougeot. They stood close for an instant, almost in each other's arms to Barchard's vision, the girl's hands resting on the man's chest. Swayne looked down with fire in his blue eyes, and said something that brought a provoking smile to Vervain's fine pink lips—lips that could kiss so sweetly in another man's remembrance. Her face was mutinous and alluring, and she took no trouble to disguise the flagrant flirtation. Yet all he had really said was "I am thinking of trying to grow your name flower at the Timber House. Do you think it would take kindly to the soil?"

"Beware how you meddle with it!" she answered, but her laugh ended on that sigh that seemed as if she spoke a veiled truth. "Vervain means enchantment—it is supposed to have some supernatural power."

"Do you think I don't know that? I have been under the spell of the enchantment for some weeks."

"But not at the Timber House!"

"That is why I want to try the experiment—to see if Vervain will weave her spells over the Timber House as well as the owner!"

No doubt the older man was showing off a little also. He was flattered at the woman's youth, would have liked to boast of her attractions, and his air of "I've just eaten the canary!" was at its most pronounced, though he was silent of the lady until she should be his avowed property, as a gentleman must be. As they drove through the summer lanes, however, Barchard heard the streak of satisfaction in all he said, and under the spur of that elementary impulse he could have struck him.

"Pretty country—what?" said Swayne, who still reverted to the slang of former years. "A bit waterless though—we have nothing but the Clayton Brook about here. Miss Coppleston was contrasting it with Devon one day—we are proud of the fact that she prefers Bucks to the West Country with all its rills and rheumatism."

"Does Miss Coppleston suffer from rheumatism?" If Swayne had been a woman he would have distrusted that smooth voice.

"I don't think she suffers from anything. I never saw a girl in better health. But she admitted that Devon took the kick out of her—she never wanted to go there again."

"I see. This has the reputation of a good hunting country?"

"You have got to ride to keep with hounds—they travel. But I don't see any competition with Leicestershire, myself—our fields are too small. We are on my

land now. That's the house, up there amongst the beeches."

Barchard looked with a fresh stab of envy. He hated his own inherited acres, and the square Georgian house that reminded him of an institution. The Timber House was a very beautiful home to offer to any woman. . . .

"You are like the Psalmist, you have a goodly heritage!" he said, as they turned in under a gatehouse and drove up an avenue of beech trees that stood out against the commoner elms of the county.

"Yes, I'm fond of the place. Miss Coppleston is not far out—it is the nicest house hereabouts, even from the owner's point of view."

"She has the gift of appreciation!"

"She has most gifts—she's an all-round success. Plucky little girl! She had to fight for her own hand from the time she was sixteen, and she's come out trumps. But I suppose they told you?"

"Yes—I have heard a good deal about Miss Coppleston," said Barchard slowly, as they drew up before the old porch. For a moment he hesitated, but he was not quite mad as yet—he had kept a remnant of control, and he did not mean to do the girl a deliberate injury.

In the great beamed hall they were met by Get-away, who sniffed suspiciously at Barchard's legs and then snapped a welcome. There was no fireplace in the hall itself, but a great brazier stood in the centre of it, and in Winter the smoke had to make its escape through the rafters as it had done for centuries. It was not a very habitable place from a modern point of view, but in Summer the master of the house sometimes lounged and smoked there. It still had the original earth floor hard-

ened with bullocks' blood and with traces of a gruesome decoration in bones hammered into it, and Swayne lifted the heavy rugs that were laid down for comfort to show Barchard, making Get-away delirious with excitement.

"*Get away!*" said Swayne laughing, and pushing the terrier aside good-humouredly. "That is how he got his name. That muzzle of his is always thrusting itself where it is not wanted. And nothing excites him like this old floor. He wants to scratch up the last traces of the bone pattern."

"That would rather spoil the historic value of your floor!" said Barchard dryly. "Is he a good dog for badgers?"

"First rate. He's a sportsman all round. Rather too keen on game as a matter of fact. He gets into trouble sometimes. My first acquaintance with Miss Coppleston was through Get losing his head over a cat in a hamper which she was meeting at the station. Some valuable imported beast belonging to Mrs. Seymour, that had come down for its health."

"Omar Khayyam," said Barchard quietly. The tragic line of his brows had twisted a little as Vervain walked into the conversation again. It seemed as if she could not keep away, and he feared himself.

"Oh, you know the beast?"

"I saw him at Mrs. Seymour's flat in London. She has two—both Persians."

"One was quite enough for us, eh, Get? Miss Coppleston rescued the hamper, and strafed me for not keeping the dog on lead. I have never been so ballyragged by a woman." He laughed at the memory with a curious

sense of exultation. "Well, its all forgotten and forgiven now, and Get is her devoted slave."

Barchard pushed the dog from him almost pettishly, and the terrier, baulked of his desire to make friends, regarded him with suspicion again. It was evident that Get-away and his master liked to bestow their approval in concert, and that it was some secret satisfaction to Swayne that the dog had taken a fancy to the lady who had claimed his own. Barchard remembered with torturing distinctness the light tenderness of her hands for the cats, and how she had coaxed them. He fancied her petting the dog, and drove it from him in a spasm of resentment.

He felt he hated the house too, from the moment of entering it. He could not get rid of a vision of Vervain running about the old, old rooms—she so seldom walked!—of her petulant little fashion of throwing herself into one of those deep leather chairs, of her voice singing about the upper rooms and echoing in the rafters. These were all his memories, transferred to the background of the Timber House, and the other man had no right to them. Yet he meant the girl no definite harm—he never dreamed of deliberately injuring her prospect of being mistress here, or of the mean advantage given him by his own coward use of her, until that overwhelming elementary impulse caught him by the throat one day, and told him that he must either kill the other man or put him off from his purpose. He would have preferred a quarrel—but that might come after. At the time he simply seized on the recurring subject of Vervain, and spoke as a man might speak who had no personal interest in the matter now, but a loose tongue.

"As I said, I have heard a good deal about Miss Coppleston—but not about Miss Chalmont. The alteration of the name seems to have had a good deal of influence."

The two men were smoking in the Solar, where the Copplestons and Anne Seymour and Vervain had all had tea on the day that Barchard's name was first mentioned. It was within an hour or so of his departure, and he knew it for his last opportunity. His host looked at him with quick blue eyes that almost challenged him.

"I did not know Miss Coppleston when she was Miss Chalmont. Did you?"

"She has not done me the honour to remember that fact."

Swayne knocked the ash off his cigar deliberately.

"Where did you meet her?" he asked.

"When she was earning her living as secretary to a League for Colonial Women—a fad of Lady Mercia's. She was shockingly underpaid and overworked. Upon my word I was sorry for the girl!"

His tone of pity was almost patronage—not quite the tone a man would use for the lady who lived with his host and hostess at the Rosary, where she was the daughter of the house. Swayne did not answer for a minute, and Barchard wondered with savage pleasure if he would turn upon him now, at the moment. . . .

"Miss Coppleston is a very plucky girl!" said his host's pleasant, decided voice after that pregnant pause. "I heard from Mrs. Coppleston that she had had a rough time of it. She deserves all the luck she gets."

"I rather wonder at her giving up her Bohemian existence though," said Barchard slowly, and his tone was

subtly suggestive of confidence. "When a girl has been as free as a man—well, she does not take kindly to a more conventional existence."

He had drawn blood at last. Colonel Swayne was looking at him steadily across the space between them.

"I think you had better say what you mean, Barchard," he said.

"My dear man, I don't want to appear to run the girl down—and after all she had a perfect right to live her life as she chose and get what fun she could out of it. It is only when one sees her in different surroundings that—well! it's a bit out of the picture."

"Kindly say what you mean."

Swayne was in the impossible position of having no right to defend the girl since he was not her accepted husband, and had never avowed any definite intention of becoming so. He could, of course, have refused to discuss her, but that only left her with the maddening uncertainty of a hinted slur on her reputation, in his mind. He could also have quarrelled with Barchard on the score of his caddish behaviour; but the man was his guest, and he had yet to prove that he was taking a woman's good name from her. The worst was not said yet. Barchard found himself calculating all this as if his mind were dual, and he saw himself and Swayne from their two points of view simultaneously.

"You don't remember seeing Miss Coppleston before you met her here?" he said quietly. "I rather wonder at that—her face is not easily forgotten."

"I never saw her before I met her here, to my knowledge."

"Do you recollect travelling down to Bristol about

six years ago in company with an older man—I learned his name by the merest chance afterwards, through the War, indeed. He is slaving at the War Office like the Briton he is.”

“Do you mean Mr. Davanant of Alveston?” Despite his easy manner there was something a little formal in the question.

“That’s the man. We travelled together as far as Bristol, and he gave me some advice about trout fishing on the Moor. I was going down to Widgery in Devon”—Barchard looked straight at Swayne for a minute—“with a lady.”

Again Swayne did not answer at once. What passed behind the mask of his good-looking face no one but an Englishman could have even guessed. All that Barchard knew was that he had touched the right note at last—Swayne was remembering, however, much against his will.

“I recollect the incident.”

“Do you recollect the girl?”

“I should not have connected the two.”

“You looked at her hard enough,” said Barchard, with assumed good humour. “I was talking to Davanant, but I knew where your eyes were.”

“I understood that the lady was your wife. You referred to her as such, I think.”

Barchard shrugged his shoulders with a slightly cynical smile. “I was her ‘Holiday Husband’ for the fortnight,” he said. “She took her annual holiday about the time I happened to be on leave in England, and we spent it in Devonshire. Don’t think I’m throwing the first stone. She may have had a dozen like experiences since, and it

has done her no harm. What strikes me as inappropriate is Mr. and Mrs. Copleston's attitude with regard to her. She is a jolly nice girl, of course, but she is not the *jeune fille*!"

It did not seem to be his own voice that spoke so lightly and easily, and he was conscious of listening to it as if the Devil sat there in his place and prompted the words to sound speciously charitable. He was conscious too of the horror of his own position, of what he was doing—and of the contemptuous verdict on him in his host's face. Yet he hugged the thought to himself that he had prevented Swayne from holding her in his arms, from kissing her, from the surrendered joy of nights that he remembered. . . . A woman might have proved his prognostication false, but he knew his fellow man. There is this peculiarity in the sex, never understood by women, that a man, if he is a gentleman, will not attempt to steal another's mistress. His wife, yes; as often as may be; but the lesser tie is more regarded, perhaps because of its very lack of stability. And then, there is honour among thieves. George Swayne might pronounce him a cur, but he would not enter into competition for the woman who was his property.

After a minute the older man spoke.

"I think we must remember that the lady is at least living under Mr. and Mrs. Coplestons' protection now," he said with a manner which put Barchard outside the pale once and for ever. "They are very dear friends of mine, and, as their god-daughter, Miss Copleston is beyond our criticism. Furthermore, I must remind you that in another hour they will be your hosts again."

Barchard did not answer. He could have struck his

man, but he could not speak to him. Nor did they shake hands at parting, though Swayne's manner was that of the man of the world as regarded his guest. He had avowed no intentions with regard to Vervain, and he did not pose as her champion. Indeed he knew that Ted had not been lying in his claim to have been her "Holiday Husband" in so far as they had certainly been travelling together as husband and wife, for when recalled to his mind he knew that the girl in the train and Vervain Coppleston were the same. That he had not recognised her was natural, seeing her in such different circumstances, and different health. He had never thought to connect the two, but as Barchard said it was not a face to be forgotten. He was shrewd enough to recognise that Barchard would not dare to make such an assertion either without solid foundation for it; what he did *not* recognise was the insane impulse that prompted his execrable taste in giving the woman away. Barchard himself knew that he was mad, and knew that in his sane moments he would never recover the self-respect he had lost in the pleasant, bachelor room with its conglomeration of masculine belongings. A comfortable room he had thought it up till now—the nicest in the old house. And now it stood out as the pit of Hell, the scene of a degradation he wished never to recall.

As he drove away from the Timber House through the great beeches he touched the chauffeur on the shoulder.

"You can take my luggage on to the Rosary, and say that I'm walking," he said hoarsely. "Put me down outside Colonel Swayne's gate, will you—I want to cut across the fields."

"Very good, sir. A little further along the road would be best. If you bear to the left you'll come out somewhere near the bridge. Keep the telegraph lines in sight, sir," said the man with no surprise. He was as well trained for a servant as Swayne was for a master.

But Barchard was in no mood to look for landmarks. He walked on aimlessly, only steering for the direction of the Rosary by a sub-conscious instinct born of his military training. The deep rich meadows lay all around him, full of wild flowers whose faint honey came up into his nostrils, and across the distance was the low hill-line which bounds everything in Buckinghamshire and means no particular range. But he saw nothing of it, he was only aware of the relief of walking because his own thoughts made inaction intolerable. He had been an utter, irretrievable cad—more, he had been a cur to betray the girl a second time—first physically, and now mentally. She had done him no intentional harm, of that he was sure, though he traced the failure of his recent life to her in a way that would have amazed her. It was for lack of Vervain, the slow discovery of how much he wanted her, that he had not married for four years after they parted. He had had time to realise it in the silence of the Moldavian forests, and once or twice he had nearly written to her to try to renew the connection; but her carefully worded letter had done its work in the first instance, and then—he had hesitated just because he had already possessed her! If she had not given him everything he would not have cared for her, but because she had been too generous he was prudish about making her his wife. Ted was always his own enemy as Vervain had told him. The craving for the girl he had aban-

done had ended in his most unhappy marriage with Violet Jackson, and that also he laid at Vervain's door. He was a man who had mismanaged his own life, and blamed everybody but himself, being only near the truth in that he tacitly admitted himself totally unable to grapple with adverse Fate.

Well, if Vervain had done him no intended harm, he could not plead the same with regard to her. He had forgotten that he was a gentleman, and had obeyed every mean prompting of his nature. He remembered the contempt in Swayne's eyes, and recognised that Swayne would never have turned traitor to a woman, be she what she might. He was a sportsman—he would give the quarry a chance for its life. Barchard writhed inwardly to think that he had struck a blow in the dark at a defenseless thing. Why, he had been more honest if he had accused her to her face, before Swayne, before them all, and given her a chance to defend herself. It was a horrible thing that he had done and for a horrible motive.

As he pushed his way through the lush grasses and flowers his face grew pinched and haggard with his own unhappy thoughts, and he seemed an older man than the one who had gone to the Timber House three days ago. The narrow jaw that Vervain had noticed seemed emaciated, and his mouth worked with his own passions. Truly he might be pitied for the Hell of his own creation, though he had seemed to go scot free. A cad, a coward, and a cur, unworthy the name of Gentleman, which is still the infallible standard in the background of an Englishman's thoughts. He had not played the game, and he had given away the woman when every

decent feeling should have made it an obligation to hold his tongue at least. Whatever Swayne thought of him it could not have been more humiliating than his own sense of his degradation.

And across his later view of her in her rosy health, came the memory that had haunted him during three years in British Moldivia after he had parted with her—the memory of a very slight girl standing by the fire in Mrs. Seymour's flat, with a white face and an atmosphere of loneliness that made her seem like a little stranded ship on desolate seas. He had lost the impression of her as his "Holiday Wife," but he had never lost that vivid picture of the deserted figure in the fire-light, and it was this that reproached him now. Her life had been hard enough up to then. He had tried to make it harder now. . . .

Truly he was somewhat to be pitied.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I had died for this last year,
To know you loved me. Who shall turn on fate?
I care not if love come or go
Now, though your love seek mine for mate
It is too late."

—*A. C. Swinburne.*

I HOPE George will come over with him," said Mrs. Coppleston on the day of Barchard's return to the Rosary. "We seem to have seen nothing of him for three days."

"We saw them both in Winslow Church yesterday," said Vervain perversely. "And I thought they looked bored to tears, but whether it were with each other or the service I could not say."

"Let us hope the former," said Mr. Coppleston quietly. "It is a beautiful service, and we had a fine old hymn for the last."

"It isn't a beautiful church anyway"—Vervain shook her head. "They say the restoring was done in the eighties, and spoilt it. There used to be a coat of arms of the lord of the manor in the east window, and a tablet telling you how many thousands of his family are buried underneath you. It must be very uncomfortable to feel that you are kneeling on your ancestors!"

"There are a fair number of Chalmonts in the church over at Chalmont Garth!" said Mr. Coppleston mischievously. "We had better go over there one Sunday and see what your sensations are."

"Nil. I am a degenerate daughter of the race, and my father was wiped out of the family pedigree years since. Shall I ring up the Timber House and ask Colonel Swayne to tea, Godmother?"

"Yes, dearie, do—and ask what time Ted will be over. Perhaps they don't want to come till dinner."

But there was no occasion to ring up Colonel Swayne, who took the initiative and telephoned that Barchard was on his way back, and he himself would be very pleased to dine but could not come earlier. Vervain herself was at the telephone, but the conversation was briefer than usual.

"How are you, Miss Coppleston? Pretty fit? We saw you in church yesterday, but you meanly left by the west door, while all properly conducted people go out by the north! . . ."

"We always go out that way because the cart waits at the bottom of Church Street, and I wanted to speak to some people about the knitting party. We have just finished our thousandth pair of socks! . . ." said Vervain demurely, and waited for the usual game of mental tennis over the wires. But the rally did not come.

"Very creditable," said Swayne's crisp voice. "I am sure you deserve an Iron Cross! Well, we shall meet to-night then . . ." and the Timber House rang off, leaving Vervain feeling as if she had expected a compliment and received a good conduct medal.

"Colonel Swayne seems to be busy—but he will come to dinner," she said dryly. "Sir Theodore is on his way home."

The motor arrived shortly after with Barchard's luggage, and the information that he was walking. Ver-

vain pondered a little, but did not let the delay disturb her. She was not anxious to meet Barchard, particularly after his reference to their former acquaintance when he was leaving on the Saturday; and if he put it off voluntarily so much the better. She did not know when he arrived, and the first intimation she had of it was his entrance into the study where she was cataloguing some newly-acquired volumes for her godfather. She was alone in the room, and looked up with a start to find Barchard almost at her elbow with a face that altered surprise into actual fear. Something dreadful should have happened to him to bring that startling change to features that had simply struck her as war-worn and slightly aged. She half rose, staring at him.

"Have you seen Mr. and Mrs. Copleston?" she said, uncertain what to say or ask.

"No—I have seen nobody. I could not find you anywhere else, so I came in here on the chance. I wanted to speak to you—don't run away. It is something I must say."

"I am not going to run away," said Vervain quietly, sitting down again. The study was always a shady room, and the sun-blinds were drawn out over the long windows, giving the dark leather and the book-cases a golden glow. In the subdued light Barchard looked ghastly.

"I have told Swayne," he said abruptly.

Her hands gripped the edge of the table where she sat, and her eyes dilated in the strange fashion he knew well. She did not ask *what* he had told Swayne—there was no need.

"Why did you tell him?" she said in an odd jerky fashion.

"Because I was out of control"—his own voice was as savage as the snarl of a wild beast with the mere remembrance of his passion. "I was mad with physical jealousy—if you must have the truth. You make me mad—you always did. I've been thirsting for you until my throat was parched, and I knew—Vervain! Swayne would have asked you to marry him!"

Her hands dropped into her lap with a curious quiescence, and her liquid eyes looked straight ahead, not at him at all. "I don't know," she said simply.

"I do. He was free to do it, and he meant to have you. You can't—you mustn't—marry him—or anybody!"

Then she turned her eyes on him with a mazed look in their translucence.

"But *you* married!" she said blankly.

"I am a man,—the world—everybody—looks at it differently," he said, the words hurrying in their urgent desire to make an obstacle truth out of falsehood. "You can't go to another man—you belong to me. You've given me everything—you can't marry, your husband would feel himself cheated. Don't you understand? You *can't* marry!" His voice was almost pitiful in its shaken cry. He felt his impotence, and the storm of physical jealousy still swept him helpless on its mad path.

She put her slender hands up to her head with another attitude that he remembered, as if bewildered. All she could repeat was her former protest, stupidly, as she felt. "But *you* married!"

"You needn't rub it in," he said roughly. "Haven't

I cursed the day often enough—but it's been Hell since I saw you again!"

"That isn't what I mean—if you married what is there wrong in my doing so too?"

"Because there's one law for a man and one for a woman—there always has been and there always will be!" he said eagerly. "You are not free to marry—you are just as much mine as if we parted yesterday—last night!"

Her face gradually hardened until it was set as if in a mould, and her eyes contemplated him with clear judgment.

"No, I am not—I never did belong to you in the least degree, except as far as I myself desired it!" she said with controlled emphasis. "You did not want me when it was all over—and after a time *I* did not want *you*. Now it seems that you want me again. But you see I don't feel any more like that. I have grown out of it, just as one grows out of playing with dolls. You have got your wife, wisely or unwisely, and no one interfered with you. I hold that you had no right to interfere with me."

His face darkened recklessly and rather hideously. "Right or not I have done it," he said furiously. "Swayne isn't going to take second-hand goods." Then in a moment it seemed he changed, and was down at her knees clinging to her, so that she turned and twisted in vain to escape him. "Vervain, for God's sake don't listen to me!" he said. "I'm mad. Any man will love you and bind you faster to him than I did—fool that I was. And I must live on and know it—unless I am lucky enough to stop a bullet over there."

She was trying to release her very gown from his grasp, extricating her arms, her hands, as he clung to them, and feeling as if his fingers were the tendrils of some poisonous creeping thing that fastened on to her. His proximity distressed her; it was no longer protecting, or a relief from loneliness. She wanted to be rid of it, and felt that she could not breathe freely with him in the same room. And yet she was not angry since he had told her of the motive of his downfall; she was rather sorry for him, as she might have been for a thief tempted to steal food from hunger, or any criminal who commits crime through a gust of passion.

"Ted, get up," she said with difficulty. "I'm awfully sorry. We seem to have made a muddle of it, both of us. But we can't do any good by ragging each other now. It seems to me the best thing we can do is to get out of each other's way."

"I shall be out of yours in a few days. My leave is up—and I'm going back." He rose slowly, but still bent over her, his eyes full of her presence. "Vervie, be good to me!" he pleaded. "Say something for me to carry away——"

"I'm sorry, Ted."

"You did love me in Devonshire?"

"I suppose so. Yes——"

"I've had two years of married life since then——" he said slowly. "Two years of the bitterest task I ever set myself——"

"What is it you want?" she asked sharply, throwing her head back to look up into his face. It altered to an ominous likeness of the one she had known—she recog-

nised it as a familiar thing, with a shudder, as one might recognise a long-dead face in a ghost.

"Darling," he said, his lips close to her ear, "I want a *holiday!*"

She pushed him from her roughly, and stood up, quivering with fear and a kind of chill excitement.

"None of that!" she said in her old *gamin* manner. "I've promised I'll go straight, and I will. If I never marry, the only sexual experience I shall ever have will be the one with you—but you can stake your soul that it won't be repeated!"

She sprang past him and flung open the shaded windows, letting in a shaft of the good day, and herself out into the cleansing air.

CHAPTER XIX

This is the story of a girl who failed,—

Art and Nature fought a fight for her, and Nature has prevailed.
But the stricken sense of failure, and the conscience smart of
shame,

Are for ever and for ever written up against her name.

COLONEL SWAYNE arrived at the Rosary at half-past seven, and found the drawing-room cool and empty. Dinner was an easy quarter to eight—it might be earlier or later—but he usually arrived a little before the time and found somebody ready to receive him. The somebody was generally the daughter of the house, and they had had a few minutes to themselves before the appearance of her god-parents.

Miss Copleston's absence struck an odd note. It might be a coincidence, or it might——

"Has that cad told her that he gave her away?" thought George Swayne, standing still as if shot. He had been walking about the room, looking at a bowl of the Clos Vougeot on a curio table, and out of the window at the sunset-flooded garden. Now he found himself stopped dead at the mantel-piece, where a portrait of Anne Seymour looked at him reflectively out of a dull leather frame. He took the picture in his hand, and regarded it even while he reflected upon the outrageous suggestion of his thoughts.

"The girl ought to know—but Barchard ought not to

tell her," he said slowly, to Anne's pictured face. "Don't think he'd have the nerve—she would give him snakes." He laughed a little at his mental conception of Vervain. "Ah, Anne! you were a pretty woman when you rode with the Warwick! You're the sort to marry if a man wants to settle down."

Vervain did not appear until dinner was actually announced, and then she came in with a rush and a laughing apology. She had been egg collecting from the farms, for the hospitals.

"I dressed in ten minutes," she said breathlessly. "If anything happens to my gown during dinner I hope no one will take any notice."

"Well, I never heard such a flagrant attempt to draw attention to a pretty frock!" said Swayne, looking his audacious approval at the cloudy pink chiffon that was as faint and soft as the last colour in the sunset sky—a drift of pale rosy cloud wrapped about the girl's white neck and arms. There was no betrayal in her smiling eyes and gay laughter; but Barchard's composure was the exhausted hush after storm. Swayne did not need to look from one to the other to be assured that his startled suspicion was correct—Barchard had dropped one step lower in his estimation, if that were possible, for he had confessed his betrayal to his victim.

"Game little monkey!" thought Swayne. "His face is enough to give him away, even if he had not done it already; but the girl is playing up for all she is worth."

It was the same in the drawing-room after dinner. Mrs. Coppleston asked for the bird's song—the same song that Swayne had gone home whistling the night

of Barchard's arrival—and Vervain sat down to the piano unhesitatingly. She sang rather well, for she had been having lessons of late, and her notes were as firm and true as if her past and present were equally unclouded.

"When the flocks break up in March,
Will you pair with me? . . ."
There's a wood of pine and larch
Where our nest might be."
(Sings the thrush
From yonder bush,
Can you hear me?)

"Never was a curve of neck
Like the one I see—
Never was a daintier peck
Than you give to me."
(Sings the dove
From yonder grove,
Be thou near me!)

"Don't look at that wild-beak there,
Ruffling for your eye!—
Mate with me, and we will share
Orchards on the sly."
(Sings the lark
In Heaven's arc,
Kiss me, dearie!)

"I like the 'wild-beak' so much!" said Mrs. Coppleston to Barchard, who was sitting beside her in his most self-contained silence. "It is a pretty little song. My dear Ted, how you are shivering! Do you feel that window?"

"It is only a slight attack of malaria—I am very subject to it," Barchard roused himself to say.

"That wretched jungle! I suppose it takes years to get the poison out of your blood?"

"It takes years to get any poison out of your blood, once it has taken hold, Aunt Anstice!"

"I thought you were in for something, when I found you looking so seedy in the study this afternoon," said Mr. Coppleston kindly. "You ought to get your leave extended, Ted—you are not fit to go to-morrow."

"A good dose of quinine will put me to rights. But I think I'll go to bed early if you'll excuse me."

Swayne had taken advantage of the conversation to walk over to the piano where Vervain still sat, fingering the notes silently. He did not ask her to sing something else, as nearly every other man would have done in her experience, his method being to come straight to the point at once and say what he had to say.

"Barchard tells me that you knew him some years ago, in London," he said, and across the room they could hear Mrs. Coppleston suggesting whisky as a necessary adjunct of the quinine with a wide-minded sympathy.

"Yes," said Vervain, and began to play snatches of the "Count of Luxembourg," which had still been in vogue at the time when she first knew Ted.

"She goes left—he goes right—
Out of mind, out of sight—
Each a lonely path is treading—
That's a truly happy wedding!"

and then gliding smoothly into the staircase waltz—

"You with me—I with you—
Dreams, you see, may come true.
Stairways that lead to fairyland,
Where we may wander hand in hand!"

"Barchard reminded me that I once travelled in the same carriage with you going down to Bristol. He was

talking to a man I was visiting, and I had leisure to look at you. I ought to have recollected your face before——”

“You were one—of those—men!——” Her hands dropped from the keys for a moment, and she drew a deep breath. That was why he had always filled her with the sense of a physical well-being—not because of his own personality, but for the lost connection in her brain, the first impression of being well cared for and protected so inseparable from that journey. Yes, of course the younger man of the two, who had not talked much but had looked at her and made her uneasy. . . .

“You *are* a naughty girl, Vervain!”

There was nothing at all unkind in the tone. There was even something a little admiring, as to a fellow rascal. And no doubt she had sunk to the level of a man in his estimation—a young man, who had sown a crop of wild oats. Vervain turned her head to see that Mr. and Mrs. Coppleston were both accompanying Bar-chard out of the door, no doubt to see to the administering of whisky and quinine in the dining-room. Her hands played on as a kind of voluntary to their departure, before she answered Swayne—

“Ah me! was it my luck
Hovering, flying past?
Was it the golden dream of a life
Come to me then at last?
Dream that call'd to my heart.

‘Now be bold!’
Fortune offers you now
A chance to have and to hold—
But once, never again,
You meet the dream of gold!”

She stopped playing, and spoke clearly and distinctly.

"I think you are under one wrong impression, Colonel Swayne. You fancy that I have not told Mr. and Mrs. Coppleston of this incident in my life which you have just learned. I have told them—all I have kept back is who it was, out of feeling for everyone concerned. I should not have mentioned the man's name, myself. But it seems now that even that does not matter."

The expression of his face altered to an involuntary respect. "Good God, Miss Coppleston, you are a plucky girl!" he exclaimed. "You have taught me a lesson about women, at least."

He took his elbow from the piano on which he had been leaning, and stood up in a more formal attitude. Barchard's illness had broken up the evening, and given him an excuse to leave, and when Mrs. Coppleston re-entered the room he met her with an easy farewell.

"So sorry about Barchard, poor devil. He was looking frightfully seedy all the week-end, but he would hop about. I'm off home myself. If I can be of any use, you've only got to ring me up. Do you want a doctor?"

"Oh, I do hope not, George! You don't think he is going to be really ill? I shall wire to his wife if he is, if only to give her a fright—tiresome woman!"

"My dear lady, poor Barchard hasn't deserved that! Give him a chance to recover. I expect he'll be better to-morrow, though he may look a bit dicky. Good-night, Miss Coppleston—thanks for the music."

He gripped the girl's hand heartily, as if to show her that their friendship was unimpaired. He had an odd feeling that it was Vervain who had behaved like a gentleman, rather than Barchard—or himself. But be-

yond a gay little nod she did not look at him—she was reassuring Mrs. Coppleston about Barchard. Swayne had not realised until that moment—he had not allowed himself to realise—how deep it had gone with him, and how the disappointment had cut him up. He had, somehow, staked his faith on her former life having been just as clean as it had been since she lived with the Copplestons. He did not know why. It was not reasonable to expect it. He would have been the first to protest that it was absurd to ask such a record of a bachelor, but all the same she had hit him hard by having been equally human. He liked her just as well—he even respected her for her bravery under his accusation—but he never dreamed of marrying her now.

And Vervain knew well that it was so, and had realised it as she sat at the piano playing scraps of the "Count of Luxembourg." Perhaps up to that moment she had had some wild hope that it would make no difference, and that Ted's betrayal would fall harmless between them. There must have been other men who had come into her life, nobler than Swayne, and more capable of seeing that one fortnight does not mar a woman's whole existence; but she had never known it because she had entrenched herself from men within her secret experience until the vividness of it wore away and she began to look at life from the normal girl's standpoint. Unluckily she had not allowed herself to think of other men; and she had begun to think of George Swayne.

As she lay in bed, sleepless, after the house was quiet, she thought of that moment at the piano when she had recognised the change in his attitude towards her.

"You *are* a naughty girl, Vervain!" He had been a good deal amused, quite ready to take advantage of his discovery if she gave him leave, the good-humoured, fast man of the world talking to the "Holiday Wife" of any fellow who might have the good luck, etc. She could fill in the hiatus in his mind. Hitherto her position with him had been that of the young princess, a little spoilt, a little capricious in her favours even, but to be wooed and won on an equality. She had lost a good deal through that fortnight in her life, just because she could not wait, because youth seemed running away with all its precious possibilities, and she grasped at the opportunity and the Adventure.

She turned on her side and bit the pillow with her little sharp teeth to prevent herself crying. She had never cried when she was working for herself and was her own defender. But the sheltered life, and the tenderness of home, had made her weak. She had wanted George Swayne for a husband, with all his imperfections and his disadvantages—had wanted the position of a real wife with a man's broad strength and common-sense between her and the world. And in realising her loss she went further and told herself, unwisely, that it would always be the same and that his attitude was typical of all other men. No one wanted second-hand goods, as Barchard had so coarsely told her, and she had had enough of trusting to her secret being safe. Too many people had known it from the first—Netty and Nolly, and Barchard who had betrayed her and might betray her again under the stimulus of a physical jealousy, and now George Swayne. No, marriage was not for her; and, what hit her harder still,

she would never have a child, since if she did, it would have to be nameless.

For the first time she regretted the freedom of her old life, hard as it had been, and a restless craving for the mere excitement of living from hand to mouth came back on her. She was a woman who wanted a strong interest in life, and whose instincts were protective through habit and training. She had flung the whole of her pent-up devotion over Mr. and Mrs. Coppleston and taken them into her heart in place of the fight for existence, and the chances of her business life, which she had never missed since because of them. Now she felt that it would have been a relief to be independent for the sake of doing something reckless, and fell back on her disproved creed that her actions could only affect herself and that she was responsible to no one else.

Her thoughts even went out as far as Canada, to the sister she had not seen for many years. Suppose she joined Ivy after all, and started life afresh in a new world. The rough limitation of the existence that had repelled her looked attractive in the reaction of her mind, the change from the conventional laws of England that had outlawed her. People would not ask questions about her past life so far off, and she would stand on her own merits if she had grit enough to face hardship and make a success of the life. It would be action and adventure, and she felt that if she found no outlet for her trouble those stirred pulses would drive her to something rash. Even now they had her by the throat.

For somewhere on the other side of the house Ted was lying as sleepless as she was, craving for her. His

whisper came back to her like an audible temptation—"Be good to me!"—the old plea!—"I want a *holiday*, Vervain!"

Yes, they both wanted a holiday, a holiday from an ascetic Christianity, and a reversion to pagan lusts. She was a young woman, denied her natural heritage of wifehood, and for a maddened space she thought of the alternative. There were strong arms waiting for her, and kisses that should rouse her senses to lull them again, and old pet names and foolish phrases known to them both . . . Only a little distance off, waiting for her . . .

For a time she could not think, she could only feel. If she could think she knew that she would be sane again, and that she would remember her promise to go straight. She clasped her slight hands under her seal-skin head and lay staring into the darkness with wide-open terrified eyes, afraid of her own body, trying to pray to the great mechanical Power in which her father had believed and which kept its relentless law regardless of poor little prayers in the wilderness of night.

Her mind certainly did not pray, but she always thought that her soul must have done so, for as she lay quiescent, her hands beneath her hair, a sudden shock made her gasp as if all her nerves were jarred and she found herself sitting up in bed listening. There was nothing to hear but the ticking of various clocks in the house, which sounded unnaturally insistent, and the rustle of the roses outside the open window. But had someone tried the door of her room or not, and was that a board creaked as his defeated step died away down the corridor? She remembered, suddenly, the night in

the tall lodging-house in Tachbrook Street when the foreigner had come up to her room with just such a stealthy purpose and she had waited, quivering, to know if the lock would hold. What difference was there between that attempted rape and this? The vulgar side of such situations rushed back over her as once before, and she sat there furious with outrage as if she had been no less than Mr. and Mrs. Copleston's own daughter.

After a time she deliberately got up and tried the door herself, carefully, to be sure that it was locked. She was so angry that she was no longer frightened, and all sensual temptation had been wiped clean out of her mind. Such a thing was impossible, of course, for Vervain Copleston. The influences round her for five years made it seem nothing but the gross impulse of indecent instincts. Whatever else she was by fits and starts, that bed-rock of refinement in her had proved a sure foundation on which to build up the structure of clean-living and self-respect.

"And besides, I promised Godmother," Vervain told herself simply, with a flash of surprise that the incontrovertible fact seemed to have failed her for that extraordinary phase she had but just passed through. "It wouldn't be playing the game when the dears trust me. They will be disappointed as it is about George Swayne." She winced a little for her own disappointment, and drew her breath nervously, for she had weathered a storm and the wreck of it still swayed her.

"If the Lord loveth whom He chasteneth, I must be extremely popular!" she thought, with the old *gamin* sense of humour. It was after this that she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XX

"The burden of sad sayings. In that day
Thou shalt tell all thy days and hours, and tell
Thy times and ways and words of love, and say
How one was dear and one desirable,
And sweet was life to hear and sweet to smell,
But now with lights reverse the old hours retire
And the last hour is shod with fire from hell.
This is the end of every man's desire."

—A. C. Swinburne.

IT seems a dispensation of Providence that the domestic morning follows on the most lawless of nights. Because Mrs. Coppleston did not come down to breakfast, Vervain must of necessity be there to pour out the tea and act deputy hostess; and she presided as usual, the oval of her face fresh from soap and water, and her eyes as healthily clear as though no ill dreams had haunted her bedside. Barchard looked at her across the table with eyes she did not care to meet. His pallor was easily explainable by his attack of malaria, but he looked so ill that Mr. Coppleston told him he ought to have stayed in bed.

"I should have had to pull myself together afterwards, and I wanted to get out of my man's way and let him pack," said Ted's familiar well-pitched voice that the girl could not shut out as she might his face. "I shall have to get back to London to-day, anyway—my leave is cancelled."

"I am afraid you are not fit to travel. Would a

civilian doctor's certificate be of any use?" said his host with some concern.

"No thanks. And besides, I am really not bad enough to shirk the summons. The quinine did its work."

"Is there anything special doing? Do you think other men's leave is being cancelled?" said Vervain, without looking up from her curried eggs.

"I could not say. But it is quite probable."

Mr. Coppleston took up the paper in the forlorn hope of finding news in its depleted columns, and the sheets seemed to enfold him like a screen, leaving the man and woman stranded who were dependent on him for safety. There was something ghastly in the conventionality of the situation to Vervain, reminiscent as it was of other mornings in Widgery when she and Barchard had sat in the sunny little parlour and eaten moorland trout and discussed their plans for the day. She knew that he was looking at her with eyes that were remembering also, until she could have shrieked aloud to relieve the tension. His presence was a nightmare rather than a temptation now that she was sane.

"Dear! dear! poor fellow!" said Mr. Coppleston suddenly from behind the paper.

"What is it?" asked Vervain almost sharply, thankful to snatch at any distraction from that silent figure sitting opposite.

"The death of an old friend, my dear. I was at College with him—but he was younger than I. I have not seen Peverell for years, and I see that he was incumbent of some small village in the middle of Dartmoor. A place called Widgery, merely a Chapel-of-Ease to a larger town called the Lady's Folly. What

an extraordinary name, by the way! I wonder what the derivation is."

There was a moment's pause. "I once passed Lady's Folly on a railway journey," said Vervain collectedly. "And—somebody—told me that the original name was simply the Ladies' Foliot. Foliot is the name of a family who held land in Devonshire, and there was a manor house belonging to three old ladies where the town now stands."

Mr. Copleston looked up from the paper with interest. "Really! Now that is just the sort of thing that would have delighted Peverell, poor fellow. He was a finished scholar, and especially devoted to Folk-lore and place names. And to think of his being buried alive in a little village on the Moor! Did you ever see Widgery, Vervain?"

"I don't think the rail runs to Widgery," said Vervain skillfully. "I believe you have to drive there. Your friend must have been very isolated."

She realised suddenly, as she spoke, how very limited and cramped of interest Mr. Peverell's life must have been in Widgery. For a brief holiday, for fishing, the place seemed ideal: or even for those sons and daughters of the soil whose work lay there, and whose days were too full of it to be dull. But for the old scholar, looking with wistful eyes to thwarted aspirations, it must have had the monotony of a prison. She thought of her own dull days of routine at the office, and the fear that Adventure would never come. She had not realised that Mr. Peverell had his office routine also, the handful of parishioners with their ignorance and their narrow lives, the duties that had not the

variation of a larger benefice. The gentle old priest with his courteous manner came back to her like a pang of remorse. She wished that she could have done more for him, and brought some novelty into his life. If she had gone back to Widgery, perhaps—but she must have gone alone, and explanations must have followed She raised her head, impatient of herself, and her eyes met Barchard's across the table.

"I am afraid I ought to take a morning train," he was saying. "I hope I shall not upset any arrangements of Mrs. Coppleston's."

"My dear Ted, not at all. Vervain will drive you to the station."

A little shock passed over Vervain's whole body. She had not thought of this unpleasant contingency. Ted's visit was to be consistently painful, but she set her teeth and determined to bear her punishment. Even the gardener's boy did not accompany them, the seat being occupied by Barchard's luggage, and they drove along the Turnpike Road and through Shipton in unavoidable tête-à-tête to catch the morning up-train at Winslow. She could only hope, passionately, that ill fate would not bring Colonel Swayne to the station to-day, for she felt that she had almost reached the breaking point.

"It was a curious chance that Mr. Coppleston should have seen Mr. Peverell's death in the paper this morning!" Barchard said at last abruptly. He had not spoken for the first mile, and she had had the excuse of giving all her attention to the pony who was fresh. She had hoped that he did not mean to speak until the very last moment.

"Yes—it did seem like fate."

"Have you ever been to Widgery—since?"

"Never."

His knee touched hers, inadvertently as she knew, but her habit of sensitiveness made her wince and draw back. He smiled with curious stiff lips, his feverish eyes never moving from her face.

"If you be a fair maid,
As I suppose you be—"

he quoted under breath.

"Don't, Ted!"

"What does it make you think of?"

"That fight—the farm labourer—down in the meadows. It was the same morning. And afterwards you fished, and I sat on a rock—and you said that rhyme." Each sentence came reluctantly, as if dragged from her.

"I was thinking of it too. I fought for you and won you that time. I have fought for you and lost you, this."

She did not answer. The cart had passed Winslow Hall and was bowling across the Square in the centre of Winslow. A tradesman at his doorway acknowledged Miss Coppleston, and a farmer, sitting on his cob outside the Bell, half raised, half touched his hat. Only a mile more now. Vervain resisted a desire to touch the pony with the whip and send him up the station road at the gallop, and trotted steadily past the church.

"What was Swayne saying to you at the piano last night? I *must* know."

"He was telling me—what you had told him."

She felt the furtive shame in his face without looking

at him, and her own flushed as if it were she who had been the cad.

"I wonder if you will ever forgive me!"

"I wonder if you will ever forgive yourself!"

"No—but I shall be hard put to it not to be glad that Swayne won't have my place. I can't help it. It's not all of me, but it's the same man who fought the other in the field for you."

She turned to him at last with grave, comprehending eyes. "I half liked it at the time—and it was for that side of myself that you fought. But I should not like it now. And there would be nothing to fight for."

"You have not really altered. People cannot alter their natures." The protest came from his own desire as much as conviction.

"It was not my nature, it was a phase. You cannot bind a woman to one phase of her life."

"I wish that I had bound you to me—you would not have called it a phase then!"

She shivered suddenly in the hot sunshine. Suppose that he had bound her, as he now wished, she felt that it would have been a kind of physical slavery, lying heavier on her with every year. Perhaps she might have made something better out of it at the time when she began to care for him; but now, caring nothing, it seemed to her that she had had a great escape. Something was struggling free in her, showing her dimly that even her own actions and their relentless results were not everything. They also were a phase. Life itself seemed a phase. There was an education or a purpose in all this.

She drew up at the station, shifted her reins into one

hand, and held out the other. It was a mute action, apologetic, final, condoning all the past, and wiping out the future.

"I can't come into the station, because I can't leave the pony," she said. "There is your servant, waiting for you. He had better take the luggage, as there are so few porters. Are you all right?"

He took her hand and held it, even while his man was removing the luggage, reckless of appearances. She was surprised and a little concerned to feel how cold he was, and that he was trembling.

"I am all right," he said, for the servant to hear, "As right as I shall ever be in this world," he added, for her ear alone, and turned away.

"Try for the next!" she said with an impulse that surprised herself. "It's the fighting chance, anyway."

It was her last word to him, for she did not wait to see the train out. She drove back steadily through Winslow, with half of her task still before her, and when she had left the pony at the stable she took off her hat and came down to the flowerful sitting-rooms with a slow and still slower step. Mr. and Mrs. Coppleston were waiting for her in the drawing-room, lunch having been postponed half-an-hour on Barchard's account. Vervain sat down at her godmother's knees, and held her hand out to Mr. Coppleston, to draw him nearer.

"Before we have lunch—before we do anything—I want to tell you," she said desperately. "That man I have just left at the station—Ted Barchard—I knew him before I knew you. I told you I had not been straight once. He was the man."

She threw up her head with a weary little sigh, and

closed her aching eyes not to see the distressed faces near her.

"I should never have told you who it was if he had not given it away himself," she said. "But he told Colonel Swayne. I think you ought to know, though I do not believe that Colonel Swayne will ever repeat it."

They took it characteristically. Mrs. Coppleston had given a little cry at the first revelation, and threw her arms round the girl at her knees with a protection that was almost fierce. "I never liked him!" she said involuntarily. Her husband drew himself erect and took the girl's hand in both his, as if to reassure her. "The cad!" he said, and his eyes flashed back his youth even at seventy-eight years. "He knew you had no father or brother to deal with."

"You mustn't give him more than half the blame," said Vervain in a low, steady voice. "I was not a young girl seduced by a villain"—her features took an odd little twist—"I was quite aware of what I was doing, and I accepted his proposal deliberately. But I had better tell you how it all happened." And she told them, with pauses between, but shirking no actual detail and making no excuse. They should have chapter and verse, and no one should find them uninformed.

"Now," she said at the end, "you must think what you would like me to do. This man is connected with your family—nothing can alter that. And I will not say that he does not tell his wife in some mood when, as he admits, he is not to be counted sane. Three people know the secret already, besides yourselves—Mr. and Mrs. Bate, and Colonel Swayne—and I think that Anne ought to know it too. It may go further. I cannot save

my face by marrying, because I do not think it would be playing the game. If a man knew, Colonel Swayne has shown me that he would not marry me."

"I thought better of George," said Mrs. Coppleston simply. Then she gave a happy little sigh. "But I'm rather relieved you know, Vervie. I was trying so hard to believe that I did not mind losing you. Now—you are doubly ours. Is it not so, Hugh?"

"Doubly ours, to protect and to safeguard," he replied with a smile, but that chivalry of his youth was on him still and his cheeks were a little flushed, making him a trifle stern in comparison with his usual gentleness.

Vervain looked from one fine old face to the other with eyes that only half comprehended. She had meant to help them by offering to go out of their lives again as she had come in, and the pain of it had numbed her. But it was better, anything was better, than that secret shadow between them. The weight on her had grown intolerable in the past few days.

"Oh, thank God you know!" she said, dropping her head on Mrs. Coppleston's knees. Her only feeling was the relief of the confession.

"Why, Vervie!—it makes no difference, dear. Hugh! make her understand. You are our god-daughter—our charge, and our responsibility."

"And indeed our daughter in God," said the old gentleman reverently.

"I wish," said Vervain wistfully, as if she were seeking something, "that I were really your god-daughter. It is only a symbol to me, but I want the symbol. I think I should like to be baptised."

CHAPTER XXI

"Come ill or well, the cross, the crown,
The rainbow or the thunder,
I fling my soul and body down
For God to plough them under."

—*R. L. Stevenson.*

THE second lesson was over, and the congregation were left pondering on the extraordinary doctrine that chooses the Acts of the Apostles as a fount wherefrom to draw wisdom if not comfort. There was a little pause in the service, and then the incumbent swept the aisle of dust with his incongruous vestments—for he was of the burly type—and led the way to the font followed by four quiet people who took their stand there as unostentatiously as if they were saying their prayers in their own rooms and no one else were present. It then occurred to the small congregation that there was to be a baptism "for such as be of riper years" this morning, and that the notice had been given out last Sunday. Some few—mostly the younger members, eager for any distraction—turned and twisted in their seats to see the object of an uninteresting ceremony had it been in long clothes; but the majority of the agricultural population, and a few "gentry" present, kept their eyes studiously before them, too indifferent or too well-bred to stare. The children were, after all, not rewarded. For there was nothing exciting in an old gentleman and lady, another lady

who was middle-aged and beautifully dressed (but that they did not know), and a young lady all in white as suited the warm Autumn weather. The round young eyes gazed for a space, but the voices were almost inaudible, and they fidgeted round in their seats again, only injured that the service should be prolonged.

"Dearly beloved, forasmuch as all men are conceived and born in sin (and that which is born of the flesh is flesh) and they that are in the flesh cannot please God, but live in sin, committing many actual transgressions——"

It sounded a hopeless beginning. Vervain had read it through beforehand, and had spent a helpless hour "under examination" by the burly Vicar who was now murmuring the words anew; but neither his conventional questions nor the service had struck her with any application until she stood actually at the font and heard them hurled at herself in all good faith. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." "They that are in the flesh cannot please God." "Committing many actual transgressions." Then why struggle? What was the use of this elaborate precaution against Nature, this mysticism of water and holy fire? Her great questioning eyes flashed up to the Vicar's hearty, sunburnt face bent over his book (he was anxious to get the christening over and return to the morning service) and found no comfort there. They strayed away to the narrow slits of windows, beyond which was the teeming, natural, outside world, happy in the September sunshine despite the fact that it "lived in sin" according to the rubric, "committing many actual transgressions" just like some

poor little overworked girl in London, desperate for her right of youth and its adventure. . . .

Chalmont Garth is not a large church, nor is it particularly beautiful, though it escaped restoration in the eighties, having little in it to mutilate. It consists of a nave and a chancel, the effect from the outside being rather like that of a crouching body and a head, owing to its squat tower being built for some mysterious reason at the east end. The bell-ringer indeed has to stand in the vestry to haul on his rope and set the one old bell calling folks to prayer, and the one stained glass window, with the Chalmont and Wedderburn arms in it, is set in the east wall of the tower, which is only platformed above it to carry the bell. On this particular Sunday morning the church was hot and stuffy, and smelt of the country people's best clothes and nose-gays of late roses and lavender that they had brought to church. In the west wall, immediately facing Vervain, was an old brass, only half decipherable, that antiquarians ascribed to the memory of Ralph Chalmont and his wife Eustacie, who died in the fourteenth century. Vervain remembered how she had said whimsically that it must be uncomfortable to kneel on your ancestors, in reference to the dead and gone lords of the manor, in Winslow Church, and she wondered what old dust mouldered beneath her to which she owed her being. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh"—from Ralph and his wife Eustacie even to Vervain of the twentieth century, their sins were upon their heads. It seemed to her a merciless logic. They had better have let it alone then, and never have existed, these old ancestors and herself.

"Let us pray."

Yes, let us pray indeed! There was a rustle amongst the Sunday clothes of the sleepy congregation as they shifted uneasily off their hard seats and on to their knees. Though they could hardly follow the fluent prayer they knew that the Vicar would expect them to take part in the service. The Chalmont pew was occupied by a little thin spinster and a lame man with a young, suffering face—cousins in blood of the girl standing at the font who neither knew them nor was known of them. But no one who could have claimed acquaintance with the Coplestons or their god-daughter attended this little, out-of-the-way church, and the ceremony had been so simply undertaken that the neighbourhood had not heard of it. Mr. and Mrs. Copleston had chosen Chalmont Garth for the sake of its remoteness, and also for the connection of her lineage, to be the scene of Vervain's christening.

" . . . We beseech Thee, for Thine infinite mercies, that Thou wilt mercifully look upon this thy servant; wash her and sanctify her through the Holy Ghost, that she, being delivered from Thy wrath may be received into the ark of Christ's Church; *and being steadfast in faith, joyful through hope, and rooted in charity, may so pass the waves of this troublesome world that finally she may come to the land of everlasting life.*"

Suddenly the girl's eyes, wild with roving, fell upon Mrs. Copleston's face that she had so often felt was made out of old white rose-leaves. Something in it lent a new meaning to the Vicar's mechanical words, and made this prayer almost a promise for the future to the shrewd young pagan about to be christened. "Stead-

fast in faith, joyful through hope, and rooted in charity," the dear old face preached a far more eloquent sermon than any the Vicar could have deduced. For the first time Vervain's heart leapt out to meet the words. The ceremony to her was nothing; in spite of her dutiful acceptance of the Vicar's tuition, this saying of prayers and pouring of water was only a pathetic absurdity to Wilfred Chalmont's daughter. She had been educated until she had learned the uses of her own brains; and she had been schooled by bitter experiences. But her very cleverness enabled her to grasp the value of example and proof. She looked from one face to the other of her Household Saints, and she read there that however trivial and tedious this religion of theirs, they were exponents that raised it from the ridiculous to the sublime. Even while the Vicar tried to lend due impressiveness to his question "Dost thou renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the carnal desires of the flesh, so that thou wilt not follow nor be led by them?" she felt some cynicism in her answer: "I renounce them all!" for they held small inducements to one who had already been through the fire and found that burning was painful. She shut the doors of her intelligent mind and swallowed the Creed that followed whole, saying, "All this I steadfastly believe," with her eyes on Mr. Coppleston's fine reverent profile. Here was a scholar, a man whom one could not dismiss as trivial, and he found this amazing tissue of nonsense satisfying. She flung herself broadcast into the obvious results of this belief, and there was real truth in her next answer—

"Wilt thou be baptised in this faith?"

"That is my desire!"

"Wilt thou obediently keep God's Holy Will and Commandments, and walk in the same all the days of thy life?"

"I will endeavour to do so, God being my helper."

A humble faith that, depending on some untried Power that she had certainly never trusted as she had her own strong will and judgment. And both will and judgment had failed her, not once but many times—very nearly to her disaster when she lay in the dark one night and heard the "covetous desires of the world, and the carnal desires of the flesh" call insistently in her ears. It was only a few days since that they had heard of Theodore Barchard's death—not by a bullet but by dysentery, disease being the camp follower of War. She thought of him now, her fellow-sinner who had seemed to escape scot free and had made such a muddle of his life that he told her he should never be "all right" in this world. Ted was always his own enemy—she would do her best not to be hers.

"Grant that she may have power and strength to have victory, and to triumph against the devil, the world, and the flesh.—Amen."

She heard the Vicar praying for her and the congregation's indifferent amen, and a minute or so later he took her by the right hand and moved her into position by the font. Then there was a murmur of names from Mrs. Seymour who had undertaken to make the Vicar get them correctly.

"Vervain Coppleston, I baptise thee In the Name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

A touch of cool water, the light in two old faces that had a look as of inspiration, the sound of Anne Seymour's voice saying "Amen." It was nothing. A symbol. Yet as she recognised the symbol, Vervain recognised something of the beauty of its suggestion—a fresh start in life, a renunciation of the past as mere failure, and a free pardon that swung her forward again on her journey untrammelled. It was worth having if it could signify that to her.

For it was not the antiquated service in a musty church, or the cross smeared on her forehead, that freed her from the bonds of sin, but the faith and hope and charity in hearts that loved her.

THE END







